

**Convention, Individuality and Feminine Musicianship:  
The Piano Girl in Nineteenth-Century American Literature**

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I, Erin Jane Atchison, declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification. All material quoted from other sources, including my own previously submitted and published work, has been faithfully acknowledged and cited.

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## Abstract

The nineteenth-century piano was not just a means of making music, but a cultural myth. In literature it is a complex conduit for ideas about femininity, social expectation and status. Nevertheless, the literary significance of the “piano girl”—the woman who played the piano as an accomplishment—has been largely ignored by critics, particularly in the field of American literature, where piano-playing characters superficially conform to conventional expectations about domestic music in greater numbers than their European counterparts.

Not all texts, however, are so happy to accept a prescribed model of feminine musicianship, and in this thesis I analyse several key texts by James Fenimore Cooper, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Stoddard, Henry James and Kate Chopin, and show how their representations of the piano girl challenge the often contradictory rhetoric of their day. Through the socio-cultural and historic understanding of the piano and musicianship in the United States, the piano girls in these texts reveal a complex pattern of ambivalence towards the role of domestic music in the performance of womanhood, and its relationship to the contingent realities of nineteenth-century American society.

In Chapter One, I introduce the narrative significance and literary antecedents of music in four of Cooper’s novels, and in Chapter Two, I discuss Fuller’s concerns about the piano as a feminine object in *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*, with reference to her music criticism and other contemporary fiction. Chapter Three analyses Stoddard’s representation of the piano girl in *The Morgesons*; the chapter combines Romanticism and musical subjectivity with domesticity and consumer theory. In Chapter Four, I locate the exceptional musicianship of Madame Merle within the wider context of feminine music in James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*. Through a consideration of the discursive meaning of repertoire in Chopin’s *The Awakening*, Chapter Five explores the complex relationship between musical performance, selfhood, and gender expectation.

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## Introduction

“There really was a piano girl,” wrote the American music critic James Huneker in 1904:

[...] the girl who played the piano in the stiff Victorian drawing rooms of our mothers. It has always seemed to me that slippery hair-cloth sofas and the “Battle of Prague”<sup>1</sup> dwelt in mutual harmony. (*Overtones* 286)<sup>2</sup>

She was a nineteenth-century phenomenon and one still keenly fixed in current understandings of Victorian life; a figure emblematic of feminine accomplishments, social mobility, the marriage market. She had almost everything to do with domesticity, but nothing to do with talent and musicianship.

Huneker was a leading figure in American music and amongst his numerous publications on music and art, he was the highly-regarded author of biographies of Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt, in addition to analyses of Chopin’s complete works and the piano solos of Johannes Brahms. Furthermore, he was a vocal proponent of women’s role on the concert stage, declaring ahead of his time that “there is no sex in music” (285). In an age when a girl playing songs at the parlour piano dominated society’s impressions of women’s musical abilities, he rather daringly claimed, “if the majority of women play [...] abominably—so do the majority of men!” (285). Although he was enthusiastic about female musicians’ ascension into American performance life, he was still keenly aware of the role the piano girl had held in the United States and Europe throughout the nineteenth century: “Every girl played the piano,” he observes, because “[n]ot to play was a stigma of poverty” (289-90).

Sometimes it seems also that every girl in nineteenth-century fiction plays the piano, or is marked by the fact if she does not, and Huneker muses about the ubiquity

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<sup>1</sup> “The Battle of Prague” by Frantisek Kotzwara has become shorthand for the repertoire of the piano girl, and it would seem that the piece really did thunder out from any drawing room unfortunate enough to have a piano. Mark Twain for instance mentions the piece in *Huckleberry Finn* (163) and in *The Tramp Abroad*, where at a hotel in Lucerne, “five or six dejected and homesick ladies” attempt to play “a clattery, wheezy, asthmatic” piano, until one “turned on all the horrors of the ‘Battle of Prague,’ that venerable shivaree [...]” (307, 308).

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Judith Tick’s influential chapter “Passed Away Is the Piano Girl: Changes in American Musical Life, 1870-1900,” from *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950* (Urbana; Chicago, 1986), for introducing me to Huneker’s discussion of the piano girl. Although I approach the issue from the perspective of a literary critic, Tick’s feminist musicology has been indispensable background material for my topic.

of the piano girl in the nineteenth-century domestic scene when he charges “Miss Austen and her troop of youthful creatures, swooning to order,” with having “stolen with charming graces across the canvas of fiction” (286). His depiction of the “Jane Austen girl” and her effect on literature might not be a very sophisticated assessment of the author’s use of music, but it is hardly controversial to note the countless nineteenth-century “girls who devote time to the keyboard merely for the purpose of social display,” fictional or otherwise (286). One critic declares that there are “two thousand scenes in nineteenth-century novels in which a piano appears” (Corbin 531),<sup>3</sup> and American texts are no exception.

Not all texts, however, are happy to swoon to the order of the conventional piano girl, instead participating in a widespread anxiety about the stereotype and her influence on American culture. Whether portrayed positively or negatively, the piano was not just a means of music, but a lifestyle, and in literature it is a complex conduit for ideas about femininity, cultural expectations and social status.

In this thesis I will analyse several key texts by James Fenimore Cooper, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Stoddard, Henry James, and Kate Chopin, and show how the piano girl functions within American writing from 1820 to 1900, and argue that the piano and piano girl are not simply signifiers of cultural practice and musical meaning, but signs that inform text and add potent agency to characterisation and narrative. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of Cooper and James with Fuller, Stoddard and Chopin reveals a far-reaching antipathy towards conventional ideals of feminine music, and a varied response to what they all present as a problematic part of society’s attitude towards accomplishment-based education. Their representations of the piano girl challenge the rhetoric of their day, while still remaining within the construct defined by Hunecker, and I will show that through the socio-cultural and historic understanding of the piano and domestic music in nineteenth-century American literature, piano-playing characters can reveal far more about their text than ever previously considered.

It is a well-documented and accepted fact that the piano, in existence in

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<sup>3</sup> Corbin quotes Danièle Pistone from her book *Le Piano dans la littérature française des origines jusque vers 1900* (Paris: Champion, 1975): “Half of them involved young single women; one-quarter involved married women” (Corbin 531).



various forms since the beginning of the eighteenth century,<sup>4</sup> holds a unique and unprecedented place in nineteenth-century western culture. The work of Arthur Loesser and James Parakilas in particular has given scholarly attention to the social history of the instrument, its role within nineteenth-century domestic and concert life, and its unquestionable association with feminine musicianship. It was so inextricably linked to feminine space and activity that Loesser wrote in his influential social history of the piano, *Men, Women and Pianos* (1954), that “the history of the pianoforte and the history of the social status of women can be interpreted in terms of one another” (267). It was a cultural phenomenon, but one steeped in domestic banality, best summarised by Richard Leppert, whose research into the representation of music in painting has become central to recent theoretical understanding of the piano girl and her role within European and American society:<sup>5</sup>

Here I recite three well-known facts about the piano in the nineteenth century. First, the piano became the ubiquitous and unrivalled instrument of the bourgeois home; second, the piano located itself almost exclusively among the amateurs as a female instrument, completing a long historical trend reaching back into the seventeenth century (this despite the fact that many men during the period played the piano, although unquestionably in far smaller numbers than women); third, the instrument underwent numerous changes of internal and external design. (“Sexual Identity” 111-12)

As I will address in this thesis, these “well-known facts” are often lost in critical assessments of fiction containing pianos, in part because of the very conventionality of the piano girl results in her being ignored altogether, but also because of a general lack of understanding about the depth of influence the piano and

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<sup>4</sup> Bartolomeo Cristofori, the Medici Family instrument maker, invented the pianoforte circa 1700. The instrument is described in an inventory of Prince Ferdinando’s instruments compiled in that year: “An *Arpicimbalo* [approximately harp-harpsichord] of Bartolomeo Cristofori, of new invention, that produces *piano* [soft] and *forte* [loud] [...]” (Good 33). Although there was constant interest in the piano throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, it only began to supplant the harpsichord in the Classical period of the late eighteenth century. Composers and performers such as Johann Christian Bach, Haydn, Mozart and the young Beethoven introduced the public to the piano and secured its ascendancy in western art music.

<sup>5</sup> In his excellent book *Music and Image* (1988) Leppert discusses in great depth the gendered expectations of music in eighteenth-century British society. Although other European countries had slightly different patterns of musicianship, British standards of music had the greatest impact on the development of the piano in the United States. In particular, the long tradition of educational writing that gendered specific instruments was widely accepted in the domestic music practices of Americans. For instance, John Essex wrote in his 1722 conduct manual that “[t]he *Harpsichord*, *Spinnet*, *Lute* and *Base Violin*, are Instruments most agreeable to the Ladies,” but the “*Flute*, *Violin* and *Hautboy* [oboe]” were “[m]anlike” (85); gender distinctions that would influence music participation in Britain and North America until the early twentieth century.



its contingent cultural practices had on nineteenth-century life. It is no exaggeration to say that the piano came to revolutionise both art and popular music, while also representing the feminine space and domestic activity like no other single object. The turn of the nineteenth century had seen a meteoric rise in piano production and consumption in Europe, which quickly made its way to North America and beyond. A growing dissatisfaction with the harpsichord, due to a changing musical aesthetic,<sup>6</sup> coincided with widespread economic and industrial change, which saw the development of machines and mass production worldwide. Any object, be it a spinning jenny or a piano, was subject to industrial experimentation and bulk production. The United States was especially innovative in its mode of piano manufacture, and American companies like Steinway and Chickering came to dominate the industry. What the radio and gramophone did for domestic music in the early twentieth century, the piano had done a hundred years earlier, and this domestic focus was central to the American market.

Despite Fanny Trollope's disdain in 1827 that there was "very little music [at American parties] and that lamentably bad" (232), from the earliest days of the industry in the 1770s Americans began to embrace the piano as both a musical instrument and an object of cultural value. No fashionable drawing room was complete, as Edgar Allan Poe wrote in "Philosophy of Furniture," without "a pianoforte (rosewood, also), without cover, and thrown open" (466). By the end of the nineteenth century, only Germany could keep up with the United States in its production of pianos: over seventy thousand American pianos were produced each year in the latter years of the century (Good 216).

American Steinways may have ruled the concert stage, but Loesser's observation that in the decades after the Civil War keyboard instruments were sold in the same shops as sewing machines, and house-to-house canvasses took both items to more remote areas (461), speaks volumes about the American sensibility of the piano as a feminine and household object. The musicologist Nicholas E. Tawa's studies of music in American cultural life also confirm this predominance of popular domestic

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<sup>6</sup> Whereas the harpsichord's mechanism relies on hooks that pluck the strings, the piano uses a series of hammers and dampeners. This allows the player to control dynamics by the strength at which they strike the keys, thus resulting in the instrument's name, *piano* (soft)-*forte* (loud).

music.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, he considers the relationship that this domestic focus had with the development of art music in the United States, and in particular his 2000 publication, *High-Minded and Low-Down: Music in the Lives of Americans, 1800-1861*, has proved an invaluable resource for my socio-cultural understanding of nineteenth-century American musical practices.

By the end of the nineteenth century, when the piano was largely accessible to people of modest means, it retained its status, ideologically, if not in practice. Its cultural value was maintained and in 1979 Pierre Bourdieu still had cause to call it “the bourgeois instrument par excellence” (*Distinction* 19). The piano was a prize consumer object, subject to the fluctuations of fashion, taste, and consumer demand; the everyman’s home orchestra, the concert instrument of the day, and one of the most powerful signifiers of femininity in the nineteenth century.

My research relies on the recognition of the semiological difference between the piano as a musical instrument and as a sign of language and cultural signification—a theory acknowledged by a few nineteenth-century cultural commentators. For instance, in his 1894 article “The Religion of the Pianoforte” for the *Fortnightly Review*, George Bernard Shaw repeated a question once posed to the pianist Rubenstein, “Is the pianoforte a musical instrument?” A seemingly foolish question by his own admission, but one for which the simple answer of “yes” would be an understatement (105). For Shaw the piano was “the most important of all musical instruments: its invention was to music what the invention of printing was to poetry” (105). It was, paradoxically, an instrument that allowed even the most unskilled player to experience music at its highest level, but offered very little pleasure to those who were forced to listen.

“Berlioz could not play the piano;” Shaw facetiously remarks, “Wagner could not play the piano; nay, I myself, a musical critic of European reputation, *I* cannot play” (110). Shaw freely admitted that his bungling over the scores of *Les Huguenots*<sup>8</sup> and pieces by Beethoven “inflicted untold suffering on my neighbors without having on a single occasion given the smallest pleasure to any human being

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<sup>7</sup> “Secular Music in the Late-Eighteenth-Century American Home.” *The Musical Quarterly* 61 (1975): 511-527; *Sweet Songs for Gentle Americans: The Parlor Song in America, 1790-1860* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1980); *High-Minded and Low-Down: Music in the Lives of Americans, 1800-1861* (Boston, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> *Les Huguenots* was an extremely popular opera by Meyerbeer first performed in Paris in 1836.

except myself" (111), but his lighthearted mocking of the generally poor standard of pianism in turn-of-the-century society addresses what he considers the serious issue of the transmission of culture. The piano was not just an instrument: it was a complex sign of cultural expectation, subjective expressivity, civic frustration, and much more. The piano was a myth within the myth of the piano girl; "a signifier formed by the sum of signs [...]," as Roland Barthes theorises (116).

In *Emma* (1815), Jane Austen gives a sophisticated portrayal of the power of the piano in her society with the intrigue surrounding the sudden appearance of a piano anonymously gifted to Jane Fairfax. Questions abound in Highbury about who bought the instrument and what it might mean for Jane, and this episode is also integral to Austen's characterisation of Emma as a "fallible heroine" because of her consistent misinterpretation of the clues that Frank Churchill is responsible (Piggott 77-78).

A recent utilisation of this scene in popular fiction poses an interesting question that is pertinent to the widespread critical avoidance of the piano girl as a narrative sign worthy of scholarly attention. In Jasper Fforde's satirical take on the "The Piano Problem" in *First Among Sequels* (2007), workers at Text Grand Central scramble to allot a handful of pianos into all novels. This juggling of instruments and texts results in an inexperienced cadet dropping "an upright Broadwood straight into Miss Bates's drawing room in Austen's *Emma*" (211), thus creating the novel's pianoforte intrigue. Although this scene is based on the rather dubious premise that "there aren't enough [pianos] to go around" and that "for some unfathomable reason that no one can fully explain, there are only fifteen to cover the entire BookWorld" (200), one of Fforde's characters makes a comment that is particularly salient to this thesis: "Pianos aren't generally the sort of things one can miss" (211).

It may seem surprising that critics have until recently ignored the literary piano (and piano girl) except as evidence for cultural and musical practices, but that they have done. As Phyllis Weliver discusses in the Introduction to *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction, 1860-1900* (2000) "[m]usic in late Victorian texts"—and one should add the nineteenth century as a whole—"has attracted little attention until recently, with the exception of George Eliot's prose and poetry" (2). Recognising the piano as myth rather than object helps explain this omission from

scholarship. Barthes writes: “there is no fixity in mythical concepts: they can come into being, alter, disintegrate, disappear completely. And it is precisely because they are historical that history can very easily suppress them” (120). The musicologist Ruth A. Solie argues in her Butlerian analysis of the historical piano girl, “Girling the Parlor Piano,” that the myth “affected the actual lives of girls and women.” It was, she states “casual” (85)—so embedded in western culture and the performance of womanhood, that it barely warrants mention—the piano girl plays because every girl plays the piano.<sup>9</sup>

The groundbreaking cultural research of Richard Leppert, whose 1988 book *Music and Image* was my first introduction to the idea of the piano as an important cultural signifier within the arts, forms the theoretical impetus of my thesis. In particular, his scholarly focus on how certain works of art represent “the history of an ideology of music [...] anchored in actual music practice” (1-2) has influenced my own approach to music in American literature. Revising his words, this is “not a social history of music, nor of performance practice” (1), but rather an attempt to understand how the piano girl, “as shaped by socio-cultural forces” (2), is an agent in selected nineteenth-century narratives, and how that socio-cultural agency functions within the specific conditions of each text.

As well as relating to the myth of the piano girl, my work positions itself in relation to other literary and musicology critics who acknowledge the socio-cultural significance of music in text. For example, Patrick Piggot’s *The Innocent Diversion: Music in the Life and Writings of Jane Austen* (1979), Lawrence Kramer’s numerous musicological studies on the discursive nature of music in text and performance,<sup>10</sup> and Mary Burgan’s influential paper “Heroines at the Piano: Women and Music in Nineteenth-Century Fiction” (1986), which have all opened the field of music in text

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<sup>9</sup> Fiction has nonetheless been an important resource for social musicologists because of the lack of primary evidence, as Tawa explains:

In available sources events of consequence are normally to the fore; the intimacies of private life are missing. Music is often scarcely mentioned, though a significant part of bread-and butter existence. To fill out the musical picture we sometimes must turn to fiction, where family life and the thoughts and feelings of individuals are more or less held up to the candle of truth and, at the least, indicate prevalent modes of living and thinking. (*High-Minded and Low-Down* 3-4)

<sup>10</sup> *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth-Century and After* (Berkeley, 1984); *Music as Cultural Practice 1800-1900* (Berkeley, 1990); *After the Lovedeath: Sexual Violence and the Making of Culture* (Berkeley, 1997); *Musical Meaning: Toward a Critical History* (Berkeley, 2002).

for further critical investigation.<sup>11</sup> In terms of American literature, Julia Eklund Koza's survey of music in *Godey's Lady's Book*, "Music and the Feminine Sphere" (1991), set in place a critical recognition of feminine musicianship as a signifier worth acknowledging in American writing. In more general terms, recent publications such as *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction* (2004) show the development of this interdisciplinary research and attempt to answer what editors Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff call "fundamental questions about the function, meaning and understanding of music in nineteenth-century culture and society as mediated through works of fiction" (xiv).

In several of the novels I discuss in this thesis, the role of music has not been critically acknowledged, and in my chapters on Cooper and Stoddard in particular, I use the above interdisciplinary models to explore the importance of music within their respective texts. Surprising though, even the criticism of music as an accomplishment in *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* by the very musical, and active music critic, Margaret Fuller has also gone largely unnoticed by scholarship. Fortunately, in this instance, the importance of Fuller's place in American musical life has been established by the musicologist Ora Frishberg Saloman,<sup>12</sup> who argues that her "writings conveyed to readers of the 1840s the importance of music to a rich inner life and to cultural vitality in American society" ("Beethoven" 104). Saloman's critical attention to both Fuller's Romantic musical theories and their relation to her literary writings provide an essential theoretical basis to my discussion of her vision of domestic music in the United States.

Nevertheless, both James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and Chopin's *The Awakening* have been approached by critics from the perspective of music. In

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<sup>11</sup> Another such study is Janine Barchas's article "The Engraved Score in *Clarissa*: An Intersection of Music, Narrative, and Graphic Design," which was particularly influential in my early research for this project. *Clarissa* Harlowe is perhaps the first literary piano girl (or more correctly, harpsichord girl) privately expressing her inner turmoil through her music. The unique thing about Richardson's representation of feminine music is that he included the score of *Clarissa*'s song, "Ode to Wisdom" [...] "By a Lady" (*Clarissa* 231). The music becomes part of the text, and Barchas argues that by physically authenticating the music within the narrative, "Richardson equates musical instruction with instruction in moral conduct" (8). Furthermore, the reader is able to sing along with the heroine, thus participating in this most private of scenes.

<sup>12</sup> "Margaret Fuller on Musical Life in Boston and New York, 1841-1846." *American Music* 6 (1988): 428-441; "American Writers on Beethoven, 1838-1849: Dwight, Fuller, Cranch, Story." *American Music* 8 (1990): 12-18; "Margaret Fuller on Beethoven in America, 1839-1846." *The Journal of Musicology* 10 (1992): 89-105.



James's novel, the musicianship of Madame Merle has certainly not gone unnoticed, and in terms of more complex considerations of music in text, Lynda S. Boren's textual analysis of Henry James and the way he interprets "his world through verbal music" (*Eurydice* 43), offers a critical precedent for discussing *The Portrait of a Lady* as a musical text. "To read James with no ear for his lyricism, his often symphonic mode of presentation," she writes, "is to misread him" (42). Developing from this study, Laura F. Hodges pays specific attention "to the deliberateness and pervasiveness of James's recourse to musical analogies and the way that they function in the novel" (2).

Regarding Chopin's *The Awakening*, Melanie Dawson's article about nineteenth-century belief in the degeneracy of Romantic music has proved a useful antithesis to my own domestic argument. While I do not agree with her rather essentialist and one-sided reading of "period suspicion toward music" (88), nor her positioning of *The Portrait of a Lady* as representative of that belief, her argument that Chopin's novel seems to "suggest (but not fulfill) stereotypes" of Romantic music (94) has been repeatedly applicable to my analysis of the complexities in representations of conventional music. Furthermore, Doris Davis's contextual analysis of turn-of-the-century attitudes towards the professional female pianist offers another reading of the novel from the perspective of art music and professional performance that has parallels and important comparisons with my argument.<sup>13</sup>

My own approach departs however from specific analysis of music as a poetic feature within the text, or from a focus on those characters that can be perceived as being within professional music standards (a point I discuss in more depth below). Periodically using piano girls from other American novels and the works of Jane Austen and George Eliot—because their use of music is a vital model for understanding the piano girl in nineteenth-century literature and society—I locate in my key texts critical ideas about music and representations of musicianship within

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<sup>13</sup> Lynda S. Boren. *Eurydice Reclaimed: Language, Gender, and Voice in Henry James* (Ann Arbor, 1989); Laura F. Hodges. "Recognizing 'False Notes': Musical Rhetoric in *The Portrait of a Lady*." *Mosaic* 32.4 (1999): 1-16; Melanie Dawson. "Edna and the Tradition of Listening: The Role of Romantic Music in *The Awakening*." *Southern Studies* 3 (1992): 87-98; Doris Davis. "The Enigma at the Keyboard: Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz." *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Cultures*. 58.1 (2004-05): 89-104.

the framework of domestic performance practice, thereby exploring the ways in which the authors utilise and manipulate the piano girl.

In this regard, I am informed by the critical framework of the piano girl established by Ruth Solie through Judith Butler's performative term "girling," wherein the piano as a signifier of the performance of girlhood involves the performance of the dutiful daughter (86). I also draw on Weliver's observation of British fiction from the period that "musical characters were not clearly aligned with only one image either in individual books, or [...] fiction in general" (1), and apply her understanding of the narrative dialogue between "fictional conceptualizations of women" and "actual trends in music-making" (2) to the American context.

Returning to the specific texts discussed in this thesis, Fuller is explicit about her dislike of the piano as an object of status over and above its requirement for music, and characters like Merle and Reisz clearly challenge the myth of the piano girl. However, as I will argue, their challenge is not always to the extent or to the same end that other critics have concluded. Similarly, the very conventional musicianship of Stoddard's Cassandra Morgeson has important, though previously unacknowledged, correlations with her wilful independence of self. Most surprisingly, the image of obedient womanhood embodied in Cooper's Grace Chatterton reveals a depth of musical subjectivity probably not even intended by the author himself.

Therefore, through the socio-cultural understanding of the piano girl, I analyse the complex and often contradictory representations of feminine music in nineteenth-century American literature and reveal a consistent thread of outward complicity to the paradigms of the myth, which masks an inner challenge to its presumptions and the performance of this cultural phenomenon in nineteenth-century American society. But first I must establish the American model of the "conventional" piano girl.

It would seem on a superficial level that the piano girl had a remarkably fixed identity in the United States, especially when one compares the sophisticated musical scenes from writers like Austen and Eliot with American novels from the same periods. "What music specifically signifies," Weliver writes, "differs from author to

author since the ideals themselves were being debated" (11), and while I will show that there was no one defining image of the American piano girl, she rarely appears as a character with narrative agency. For instance, Victorian representations of the musical woman as potentially demonic (the focus of Weliver's study) are largely absent from nineteenth-century American literature. By the end of century, characters like James's Madame Merle and Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz can be read as complicated revisions of the siren figure—the musical and seductive “mythical prototype of a *female* demon” (Weliver 6)—but it is difficult to find an American character like Rosamond Vincy in Eliot's *Middlemarch* who performs the ideal of feminine accomplishments but, like the basil plant in Keats's poem, “flourished wonderfully on a murdered man's brains” (835).

Sexual seduction is unquestionably intimated in the stereotypical nineteenth-century scene of courtship at the piano, but American writers seem reluctant to let a female musician truly manipulate the conditions of her performance and the wider ideals of domesticity. For example, in “The New Adam and Eve” (1843), Nathaniel Hawthorne may charge feminine accomplishments as part of “the world's artificial system [...] merely the interpolation of the perverted mind and heart of man” (746), but his American Eve still “has a dim idea” that the pianoforte, along with embroidery and a broom are “instrument[s] proper for her hand” (755). Rather than engage with or confront the conditions of gendered social expectation, the new Adam and Eve choose to abandon it altogether and embrace nature, reinforcing Ann Douglas's observation in *The Feminization of American Culture* (1978) that “major American authors from the Victoria era,” when treating such subjects, “turned their sights principally on values and scenes that operated as alternatives to cultural norms” or “lapsed into *pro forma* imitations of conventional models” (5, 6).

There was a widespread anxiety about the transplantation of a European aesthetic into American life, and the piano, like Alice Pyncheon's harpsichord in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, can often belong to another time and a foreign place, “brought with her from beyond the sea” (517), and extraneous to the author's hopes for the New World. For instance, in my 2004 article, “Transporting Elizabeth Temple's Piano: Literature and the Piano in the Early American Republic” (based on my 2003 Master's dissertation), I questioned Cooper's inclusion of a piano



in his 1823 novel *The Pioneers*. The piano is not an implausible household object for a novel set in 1793, but an unlikely feature in an isolated upstate New York community. Focussing primarily on the history of the piano in the United States, I came to the conclusion that this piano said more about the novel's heroine Elizabeth Temple, her list of accomplishments, and the social expectations of genteel femininity in 1820s New York, than the development of the American piano.

The implausibility of a piano at that particular time and location, only adds to the fantastic elements of Cooper's family parody. It is enough that pianos were available in America at that time. Whether it was an imported or local instrument is nothing but conjecture beyond the realms of practical scholarship. The over-riding importance of the piano is that it declares Elizabeth Temple a fashionable and accomplished lady. (Atchison 46)

Charles Brockden Brown mentions pianos briefly in both his 1799-1800 novel *Arthur Mervyn, or Memoirs of the Year 1793* and his *Weekly Magazine* serial "A Series of Original Letters" (April to June 1798), proving that pianos were available to some members of society in the early American Republic.<sup>14</sup> However, the impracticability and sometimes implausibility of the instrument was often deliberately evoked in American fiction well into the nineteenth century.

One such example found in William Gilmore Simm's 1845 short story, "The Last Wager, or the Gamester of the Mississippi," draws attention to the incompatibility of feminine accomplishments with the practicalities of American expansion:

She has all the qualities which should command the liking of a sensible and worthy young man. She, too, is sensible; she is intelligent; she has knowledge; she has read books; she has accomplishments; she sings like an angel; plays on several instruments—piano and guitar! (94)

Rachel is the very essence of the accomplished lady, but Simm's story is not about a young woman destined for society and social prestige. It is about a wife in a modest log cabin in the early days of the American west who was won in a poker game. In the socio-sexual economy of nineteenth-century marriage, the role of feminine

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<sup>14</sup> See *Arthur Mervyn* (1: 53, 75) and *The Rhapsodist and Other Collected Writings* (113, 119-120). While these works do reinforce the feminine stereotype of the piano—in both instances the instrument is played by a woman—they fall outside of the time period and cultural situation of this thesis. In particular, the performance in *Arthur Mervyn* reveals a musical aesthetic firmly rooted in the eighteenth century and not the musical expectations of the nineteenth-century piano girl.

accomplishments could not be more explicit, but Rachel's social quality is more than a little beyond the expectations and understanding of her future husband. He hasn't even heard of that strange thing, the piano:

'Piano and guitar!' said I.

I didn't know what they were. I felt sure that the old fellow was mad, just out of a hospital, perhaps; but then where did he get the money and the gold things? I began to think more suspiciously of him than ever. (94)

Pianos, however cherished, often appear to function in fiction as little more than a prop, and while the pianos and piano girls I study in this thesis have far more to say about their texts, one of the most interesting things about Rachel's piano, Elizabeth Temple's and so many others' is that they are never played. They appear briefly to indicate something or other about a female character, remaining unplayed, and never resurface again in the narrative. For example, in Susanna Rowson's epistolary novel from 1813, *Sarah, or the Exemplary Wife*, the piano signifies the protagonist's possessions and acceptance of decreased financial circumstances:

To be sure, I miss my piano, but I have my guitar, which, together with my watch, half a dozen chairs, a small carpet, a bed and furniture, were sent to my lodgings by one of Darnley's creditors, the morning after he was set at liberty. (107)

Sarah does "practise a new air upon [her] guitar" later in the narrative, but even then, it, along with her art, forms part of the stereotypical schedule of feminine accomplishment and "daily amusement," governed by the expectation of "receiving approbation from one of whose judgment I have the highest opinion, and who I know, if he cannot praise with truth, will remain silent" (255). In other words, her piano and accomplishments define her position as a wife.

The understanding of nineteenth-century feminine music and its relation to a woman's role as a wife or a daughter—the image personified by Huneker in the piano girl—is definitely present and celebrated in American literature. Indeed, it is very easy to find the "angel of the hearth" at the piano in the sentimentalised and nostalgic world of mid-nineteenth-century America that Douglas so intelligently charts, and it is important to establish the model of conventional musicianship in American fiction.

Music was a feminised activity and one that was promoted as ideally suited to woman's emotional temperament; emotion that could ideally influence for the better

the men in their lives. For example, in Catharine Sedgwick's *Clarence; or, A Tale of Our Own Times* (1830), a wife sentimentally reminds her husband of how music is linked to their love:

“Do you remember, Layton—I think it was the very day after we were engaged—do you remember your shedding tears, at my singing a little Scotch air; do you remember?” He made no reply. “Orpheus’ miracle was nothing to mine, he only made the stones move.” (II:7)

Nina Baym identifies Sedgwick's 1822 novel *New-England Tale* as the original work in the antebellum genre she calls “Woman's Fiction,” and significantly Sedgwick's novels are full of images of the piano girl that signify status, taste and luxury, but most importantly home and domestic felicity. Sedgwick's understanding of the piano, as a character in *Home* (1835) informs the reader, is as a cultural object that “will increase the attractions of their home, and tend to raise them above coarse pleasures” (35).<sup>15</sup>

The perceived natural femininity of music is further illustrated in the scarcity of male musicians in American fiction. A man may, like Sedgwick's Mr. Layton, shed a tear over his wife's music, but he was not expected to devote the time to perform himself. Despite the reality that most professional musicians were male and men did learn music, one rarely encounters a male pianist in American stories, and one certainly does not encounter a Daniel Deronda. Those men that do play tend to reinforce the conventional designation of music as a feminine pursuit. Occasionally in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century texts a man will play the flute, as taste and etiquette dictates; he may serenade a woman lightheartedly from the piano, or join in with glees and drinking songs,<sup>16</sup> but if he has pretensions to play more

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<sup>15</sup> Baym defined works as “Woman's Fiction” when they met the following three conditions:

They are written by women, are addressed to women, and tell one particular story about women. They chronicle the ‘trials and triumph’ [...] of a heroine who, beset with hardships, finds within herself the qualities of intelligence, will, resourcefulness, and courage sufficient to overcome them. (22)

Nevertheless, in response to criticism of the limitation of her paradigms, in particular the omission of Harriet Beecher Stowe from analysis (Harris, *Nineteenth Century American Women's Novels: Interpretative Strategies* 9), Baym reconsidered in 1992 the accuracy of her claim for Woman's Fiction that the “genre absorbed the full energies of almost all the women novelists in America for fifty years [...]” (*Feminism* x).

<sup>16</sup> As Koza discusses, male musicians were typically depicted in *Godey's* playing woodwind instruments and singing glees (107). Most importantly, while men may engage with music, they are rarely seen in the literature of the period playing the piano. For instance, in Stoddard's *The Morgesons* her hero, Desmond Somers, is a singer, and in her first published work, “My Own Story,” the character Maurice is often described singing or playing the guitar.

seriously, particularly if he is a gentleman like Laurie in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (1868), he is participating in a vain, idle, and potentially feminine activity. Reflecting the societal attitude influenced by the established belief that "[music] wastes so much of a young Man's time [...] and engages often in such odd Company, that many think it much better spared [...]" (Locke 252),<sup>17</sup> Laurie eventually realises he must live like a man—which in his case results in marrying Amy, "the beautiful, accomplished girl" and becoming "a steady, sensible, business man [...]" (431, 466).

The widespread influence of magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book* (1830-1898) reinforced a notion of the piano in American life as the musical heart of the domestic sphere, a feature of feminine life that was based on the belief that "Music is the soprano, the feminine principle, the heart of the universe" (Koza 104-5). Douglas calls Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the magazine from 1837 until 1877, "the most important arbiter of feminine opinion of her day" (45), and Koza's survey of *Godey's* reveals an ethos that music came naturally to women, and when executed in the private space of the home, had a civilising influence over a woman and her family's spiritual needs. Stories encouraged music as a domestic pursuit, and the publication of sheet music in the magazine provided appropriate repertoire for this purpose.

Even the occasional need for a woman to teach music was acknowledged throughout the magazine's sixty-eight year run, but professional musicianship was not an acceptable option for a *Godey's* lady. For instance, one story entitled "Woman's Worth" from March 1843 describes the talent of an opera singer heroine as a "[s]trange perversion of nature's noblest endowments" (qtd. in Koza 117). The piano was the ideal musical heart of the domestic space, but it was also the instrument of Romantic self-expression and thus potentially encouraged an independent spirit that could threaten this domestic stability. It was not to be sought above the requirements of family duty, but as I will discuss throughout my thesis, this potential for Romanticism to threaten domestic stability did not always happen within the easily recognisable boundaries of concert performance, or indeed, function outside of domestic convention.

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<sup>17</sup> John Locke's 1698 publication, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* was a hugely influential and bestselling educational treatise throughout the eighteenth century, and was still in print in well into the nineteenth century.

Nevertheless, the desire for a public voice was a recurrent feature of didactic musical stories. Rebecca Harding Davis's "The Wife's Story" (1864), published in the *Atlantic Monthly*, tells of a woman who must make the choice between her dreams of musical fame and her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Although Davis treats her narrator-heroine Hester sympathetically, even her ability to compose music—"the highest soul-utterance" (121)—is not reason enough to forget that her life's work is "to make herself a visible Providence to her husband and child" (138).

Hester's musical ability is relatively unique, but this theme of renouncing music and the piano continues in other novels of the period. In Hale's 1852 novel *Northwood; or, Life North and South, Showing the True Character of Both*, the refined but disciplined Annie Redington must give up her piano when she moves to the plain domestic surroundings of her uncle's home:

So the sweet girl played her farewell air, kissed the instrument which had so often afforded her ecstatic delight, wiped her eyes, and with a smile followed her uncle to his carriage. (144-45)

Annie, who is described by the narrator as the "pure page [...] enclosed in a beautiful binding" (143), never complains of her loss, and in time, learns to find solace in the musical rhythm of the spinning wheel—it "did that for Annie which the harp of Apollo would never have effected" (145). The piano clearly represents a more genteel existence incompatible with the domestic realities of reduced circumstances, and the ideal American girl does not need her piano to fulfil her emotional requirements.<sup>18</sup>

The benefits of music were simple: it provided a means of entertainment in the home and the potential for the spiritual fulfilment of a woman and her family. Later in the century, the British music writer Rev. H.R. Haweis celebrated the emotional fulfilment provided for women in music, stating that with music comes "a power of relief and a gentle grace of ministration little short of supernatural" (111).

Let no one say that the moral effects of music are small or insignificant. That domestic and long-suffering instrument, the cottage piano, has probably done more to sweeten existence and bring peace and happiness to families in general, and to young women in

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<sup>18</sup> The conflict between the middle-class need for pianos as a marker of social status and the work ethic necessity of frugality was a feature of piano manufacture on both sides of the Atlantic from the late eighteenth century. "[S]ome makers of square pianos," Leppert writes, "accommodated them for double functions as sewing tables, tea tables or writing tables" (*Music and Image* 155). In this way the piano was seen not just as an instrument for music but a domestic tool.



particular, than all the homilies on the domestic virtues ever yet penned. (112)

Haweis's *Music and Morals* (1872) was such a popular book that it received twenty-four reprintings until 1934 in the United States alone, and was a standard music text for amateurs (Baur 124).<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it was utterly compatible with the moral sentiments of the second half of the century, and the literature that encouraged a home- and family-focussed music which not only allowed for sentimentality, but actually celebrated it.

In the moral rhetoric espoused by figures like Haweis and Hale, the piano girl was expected to play music with little more inclination than the social expectation that ladies play the piano, and had to navigate her performance of ideal womanhood without being seen to perform. Even music's role in courtship and the socio-sexual economy of the marriage market had its place in this social code. A girl performed her ability to fulfil this spiritual function in the home by performing music for would-be suitors. Provided, of course, she did not play for show. Public display was a suspect activity, and one which had been thoroughly denounced since the eighteenth century.

Maria Edgeworth in *Practical Education* (1798) famously, and sarcastically, criticised her society's obsession with the accomplishment of music at the expense of a girl's practical domestic education:

But would not you, as a good mother, consent to have your daughter turned into an automaton for eight hours in every day for fifteen years, for the promise of hearing her, at the end of that time, pronounced the first private performer at the most fashionable, and most crowded concert in London? (4)

Edgeworth saw the hypocrisy in the so-called privateness of these drawing room displays of musicianship, but more importantly she realised most girls were never going to become celebrated lady amateurs and so why waste their time. Any ideals of the piano as a practical instrument of femininity were usually undermined by the countless Mammias, whom the transatlantic writer Susanna Rowson condemns in "Essay on Female Education" published in *Mentoria; or the Young Lady's Friend* (1794) for demanding that their daughters, irrespective of social and economic status,

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<sup>19</sup> In Willa Cather's *Song of the Lark*, Thea Kronberg receives her early musicological information from "Mr. Haweis's book" (252).

are “*genteelly* educated.” She laments the “present mode of educating females” that sacrifices the useful for the ornamental (2: 86). A woman without an independent fortune would be wiser in Rowson’s eyes to learn more practical skills (89).

The piano’s pejorative association with fashion and feminine education is similarly represented in American literature, often in the manner of James Kirke Paulding’s 1814 poem “To the Ladies,” expressing disapproval at society’s obsession with making its daughters learn the piano purely for accomplishment’s sake:

Judge then, my friends, of my surprise  
The ire that kindled in my eyes,  
When I relate, that t’other day  
I went a morning call to pay,  
On two young nieces; just come down  
To take the polish of the town:  
By which I mean no more or less  
Than *a la Francaise* to undress;  
To whirl the modest waltz’ rounds,  
Taught by Duport for snug ten pound  
To thump and thunder through a song,  
Play *fortes* soft and *dolce*’s strong;  
Exhibit loud *piano* feats,  
Caught from that crotchet-hero, [...] (ll. 25-38)

The reader is in no doubt that the playing of “fortes soft and dolce’s strong” is not only musically inept, but as improper as the utterly *immodest* waltz.

As the nineteenth century progressed and social conditions changed drastically due to industrialisation (and, in the United States, the effects of the Civil War), this anti-performance rhetoric found its practical domestic equivalent in Catharine Beecher’s hugely influential *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) and the domestic science manual, *The American Woman’s Home* (1869). “Everything is moving and changing,” Beecher wrote in 1841, “Persons in poverty, are rising to opulence, and persons of wealth, are sinking to poverty” (*Treatise* 16), and whereas Hale sought to define “[t]he lady’s role as a spiritual exemplar to her competitive-minded husband [...]” (Douglas 57), Beecher promoted housework as a profession in response to the changing nature of domestic and gendered expectations.

Music, which is only briefly mentioned in the chapter on “Domestic Amusements,” was considered a feature of domestic industry and education:

Another very elevating and delightful recreation for the young is found in *music*. Here the Writer would protest against the common

practice, in families, of having daughters learn to play on the piano, whether they have a taste and an ear for music, or not. A young lady, who does not sing well, and has no great fondness for music, does nothing but waste time, money, and patience in learning to play the piano. But [...] if the scientific mode of teaching music in schools could be more widely introduced [...] much would be done for the happiness and elevation of the rising generation. (*American Woman's Home* 260)

Effectively, Beecher is reconfiguring the anti-display and anti-accomplishment rhetoric of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries within the paradigms of her professionalised domesticity, and it is easy to identify a writer like Rowson as a precursor to Beecher's post-Civil War domesticity. However, looking beneath the surface of Rowson's conduct advice, one can see that her understanding of the piano had multiplicities not immediately present in the rhetoric of Beecher.

Rowson recognises that it was not as simple as whether you bought a piano for fashion's sake or for music's, and even in her brief discussion of music in *Mentoria* I read a distinct belief that the moral or financial benefit (or the cost) in the accomplishment of the piano was determined by individual circumstances. Music was an essential part of any ideal feminine education and the piano was deeply rooted in the domestic space, but Rowson's essay sets the pattern for a very complex set of rules about how and what a woman should be playing. There was a thin line between an education of economy and industry, and a young lady with all the hope of a genteel education who is denied the privilege. Rowson was equally dismissive of parents who "believe that the good housewife and accomplished woman, were one and the same thing" (*Mentoria* 2: 64-5), and she pities a Miss Withers who was educated to "form the complete house-keeper [...] But to the fine arts she was a perfect stranger. Music, dancing, or drawing, had no charms for her, nor had she the least idea of the pleasures resulting from a well informed, elegantly cultivated mind" (65).

This is much more in keeping with Sedgwick's philosophy that "[a] piano," along with such cultivated articles as "the best foreign and domestic reviews," were luxuries compatible with simple furnishings and prudent housekeeping because they were "indications of taste, and refinement, and intellectual occupation" (*Clarence* 79), not merely the acquisition of status through fashionable objects. Gentility was still something to aspire to, and despite the success of Beecher's "scientific"



approach, the attractions of music proved far greater than the collective happiness of the younger generation. Nevertheless, where Rowson's theory stands apart from Sedgwick's is her suggestion that the nature and situation of the girl determines the conditions of her education and musical needs, and this sets an important precedent for the piano girls of this thesis.

The American writer and woman's rights activist, Elizabeth Oakes Smith,<sup>20</sup> was particularly vocal about women's "right to individuality" (*Woman* 27), and "Characterless Women," one of her articles from 1842, has particular resonance with the theme throughout this thesis of piano girls who refuse to conform to the prescribed role of domestic music expected by American society. The term "characterless" and her declaration that the "perfection of a woman's character is to be characterless" (199), comes directly from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's discussion of women in Shakespeare: "'Most women have no character at all,' said Pope, and meant it for satire. Shakspeare, who knew man and woman better, saw that in fact it was the perfection of woman to be *characterless*" (*Table Talk* I 208).<sup>21</sup>

Rejecting the popular belief satirised by Alexander Pope in "Epistle to A Lady" (1735) that women were, generally speaking, "Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,/And best distinguished by black, brown, or fair" (ll. 3-4), Oakes Smith develops her positive understanding of the characterless woman from *Antony and Cleopatra*: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale/Her infinite variety [...]" (2.2.245-46). Criticising "the statue-like creations of Maria Edgeworth, and the thousand and one other romance writers who expect a woman to move by rule," she argues that the fate of "the noble—the ideal [...]" is that of the fabled bird, whose own intensity kindled its funeral pyre" (199). Oakes Smith calls them women of character, or women who conform to a character, and argues that "a true woman" is characterless, because she "must, as circumstances warrant [...], [be] a 'creature of infinite variety'" (199).

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<sup>20</sup> Oakes Smith has until recently been ignored by American scholarship, but she was one of the leading figures in American letters in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Part of Poe's literary circle and wife of the editor and writer Seba Smith, Oakes Smith wrote seven novels, poetry (her most famous, "The Sinless Child") and numerous articles in the leading magazines of the day. In addition to this, she was a tireless supporter of the woman's rights movement and succeeded Margaret Fuller as arts editor for the *New-York Tribune*.

<sup>21</sup> The opening lines of Alexander Pope's "Epistle to A Lady Of the Characters of Women" (1735) read "Nothing so true as what you once let fall,/Most women have no characters at all" (ll.1-2).

In the case of the piano girl, we can apply Oakes Smith's theory and say that conventional music was too prescribed, and its ideals too noble for the contingencies of real life. The characterless woman at the piano, like the women in the texts I discuss, play according to the conditions, restrictions and opportunities of their individual circumstances. They are not mere piano girls; "[w]hatever may be their dignity, their intellect, their fortunes, they are still women" (200).

Perhaps the best known of all American piano girls is Beth March in *Little Women*, who plays Christmas carols for her family and is an angel of the domestic scene. Beth's existence is bound up in her piano, and she is not too proud to admit that her burden in life is "dishes and dusters, and envying girls with nice pianos [...]" (13). With her "flowers, pictures, her piano, the little work-table, and the beloved pussies" (398), Beth is both the ideal daughter and the ideal piano girl. She is humble, good, and her short life is intertwined with dedication to her music and to her family. Even after her death, Beth's songs played by Amy "touched the listeners' hearts with a sweeter power than any other inspiration [...]" (437). Yet as Beth does not survive into adulthood, Alcott's novel suggests that this ideal of domestic music is not possible for all girls, and perhaps that it is difficult to translate to the reality of adult life. Jo, after all, would never be such a musician, and neither does Alcott suggest she should be. She encourages girls to be individuals, even within the framework of their domestic responsibilities, and this theory was echoed throughout the nineteenth century.

Not all piano girls, and certainly not the ones I discuss in depth, conform to the cult of domesticity, but they do nonetheless fall within the construct of a domestic and private musicianship. "The doctrine of separate spheres," as Baym argues "was once thought to reflect reality; now it is recognized as a rhetorical construct designed to intervene in cultural life but over whose content there was no consensus" (*Feminism* 167). Nevertheless, it is all easy to discuss these characters within the framework of the cult of domesticity and wider theories of a feminised American culture. As Barbara Welter wrote in her famous article "The Cult of True Womanhood," mid-nineteenth-century writers "made it very clear that if women invoked the muse, it was as a genie of the household lamp [...]. The literary woman must conform to the same standards as any other woman" (166). And so too for the

musical woman.

When the doctrine of separate spheres is taken at its most literal, a dissatisfying domestic scene is inevitably indicative of a desire for a public voice and public appreciation, and the performing woman is essentially choosing to live outside her designated sphere. Throughout the nineteenth century women were celebrated private performers, but the Victorian “phenomenon of the virtuoso” has permeated our own appreciation of nineteenth-century music (Roell 8), and the concert performer is often considered the zenith of Romantic musicianship and anti-domestic sensibility.

The famous line from Madame de Staël’s *Corinne, or Italy*, “It seems to me that I could have sent a delicately improved mechanical doll in my place. It would have fulfilled my function in society very well” (249) is immediately applicable to several of the piano girls and attitudes to feminine music in literature of the period, and concerns about invoking the muse. The character of Corinne—“the most famous woman in Italy [...], poetess, writer, improviser, and also one of the most beautiful women in Rome” (21)—is recognisable in many nineteenth-century calls for art in women’s lives. She is the genius who lives for her art and suffers through her love, and the novel was without question a key text for any woman seeking a voice outside the confines of convention. W.H. Channing famously called Margaret Fuller a “Yankee Corinna” (173) and de Staël’s novel also inspired Oakes Smith’s frustration in *Woman and her Needs* that “men seem resolved to have but one type in our sex” (27), and to narrow the feminine world “to the four walls of the saloon or the nursery” (82).<sup>22</sup>

In particular, my chapters on Fuller, Stoddard and Chopin all respond to the belief that a woman should have “strength of purpose, great interests, and an independent existence” (de Staël 21), and this is enacted in varying ways through music. However, this does not predicate the need for genius and the desire for public attention. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, Fuller might have hoped for a time when the United States could produce a composer to compare with Beethoven or Mendelssohn, but she does not propose how to make women concert pianists. Furthermore, none of my texts are cautionary tales about why one shouldn’t dream of

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<sup>22</sup> *Woman and her Needs* was written as a series of essays for the *New-York Tribune* between November 1850 and June 1851.

becoming a star, but rather, these are sophisticated critiques of the nature of feminine music. Even Cooper and James, those men so distrustful of “women-made society” (James, *American Scene* 347), appear to be grappling with this larger issue of how a female character expresses herself through music in the constantly changing conditions of nineteenth-century society.

Narratives like “The Wife’s Story” and articles in *Godey’s Lady’s Book* established a precedent in American letters that the female musician must use her talent only within the sanctioned grounds of the private space, which creates a theoretical opposition between subjective musical expressivity and domesticity. This effectively places the musical scenes I analyse, even those written by Cooper and James, within the private/public dichotomy of criticism surrounding that “d\_\_\_\_d mob of scribbling women,” as Hawthorne put it in an 1855 letter to William Ticknor (*Letters* 303): women writers’ struggles with reconciling their domestic rhetoric with their public role; and male writers’ reaction to “the shredding fabric of patriarchal authority” (Gilbert and Gubar, *No Man’s Land* 1: 21).

While this certainly informs the theoretical structure of my thesis, it is reliant on a singular notion of ideal feminine musicianship and creates difficulties in critical assessment of music that supposedly contravenes convention. Mary Kelley’s original Preface to *Private Woman, Public Stage* (1984) makes the link between musical performance and women’s writing explicit by using Caroline Howard Gilman’s account of an 1819 “unique” performance by “a lady singer” as an introduction for her analysis of literary domesticity:

Her public concerts are marked by this peculiarity that she enters the room with a private party, for she is greatly noticed, and seats herself with the other ladies. When the company has assembled, she is led to the piano by private gentlemen of the first respectability, and after every song takes her place among the ladies, one of whom keeps a shawl ready to throw over her. (vii)

The female musician—the celebrated lady amateur—required by financial circumstances to put her art into the public sphere, performs her domesticity by recreating the conditions of a private performance.

The physical nature and representation of the performing woman forms part of the approach taken by Doris Davis in her excellent article about the characterisation of Mademoiselle Reisz in Chopin’s *The Awakening*. The concert

pianist was seen as “unnatural” and, she writes:

Some women artists, in fact, succumbed to public scrutiny of their femininity by emphasizing domestic interests. Much like Chopin herself, who presented a public image as one who wrote effortlessly at home amidst domestic concerns. (92)

Reisz is not a concert performer in the sense of the famous American pianist Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler (1863-1927), but Davis successfully argues that “[she] embodies these perceptions and that she reflects Chopin’s own sense of aesthetics” (Davis 90). Yet despite her ability, Chopin still places the “artist” within a very socially acceptable, if not entirely domestic frame—she plays at private performances and teaches to make a living—and hints at a very practical point for all artists, both male and female, and one also discovered by Edna Pontellier: it is all very well to want to live as an artist, but that doesn’t automatically mean you will be successful.

It is essential to reiterate that most musical scenes in American fiction are largely untouched by literary criticism beyond their surface functions as signifiers of feminine accomplishments, and therefore a standard critical position is difficult to establish. Nevertheless, the real and the literary worlds of the piano girl provide no easy generalisations about the divide between social obligation and musical transcendence, and I wish to show how this reluctance to conform to the convention of domestic music does not necessarily act out in literature in a radical or concert context.

Furthermore, the dialogue between so-called “real life” and literature repeatedly stumbles up against the question of which real musical experience compares with the literary piano girl. We might call this the “Clara Schumann problem,” whereby a character who shows musical proficiency and something more than the average sentimental response to music is compared with the “real world of female pianists,” as Davis calls it (91). The “real world” is that of Clara Schumann, Fanny Mendelssohn, and the mere handful of women who were successful as concert pianists. At least Davis’s use of such historic figures is reasonable in the context of her argument, but I take specific issue with one critic who quite frankly misses the point entirely by likening Mademoiselle Reisz to Paganini and Liszt (Dawson 92). Davis has the common feminist decency to discuss contemporary *female* concert pianists and not exceptional (in their performance style and publicity, as well as



musicianship) males from two generations earlier than the period in which the narrative is set.

This tendency towards historic comparisons mistakenly attributes unconventional musical practice with a desire for public attention and extremes of musicality. Proficiency and fame can be mutually exclusive, as any struggling musician will tell, male and female alike. Furthermore, amateurism does not mean adherence to domestic and sentimental paradigms (as this writer, an active choral singer, periodic paid soloist, and very occasional music lecturer, can tell you).

In "The Perfect Wagnerite," a piece in which George Bernard Shaw was quite happy to jokingly refer to himself as one of "an inner ring of superior persons to whom [Wagner's *Der Ring des Nibelungen*] has a most urgent and searching philosophic and social significance" (422), he was still quick to dismiss critical fawning of professionalism at the expense of good amateur music-making.

Amateur art is discredited art insofar only as the amateur is known as the ape of commercial art. Persons who go to the theatre and opera house only to be smitten with an infatuate ambition to reproduce in their own untrained persons what they see the great professional artists doing there, are mostly foredoomed to failure and ridicule. (544-545)

Some people are just not good enough to ever consider a career on the concert stage, some people do not have the opportunity, and some brilliant musicians just don't want to. It is not an indicator of whether they have a problem with the act of professionalism, and it is extraneous to the concerns of textual analysis.

In terms of scholarly criticism, in the dialogue between fiction and real life, one must adhere to the text. If a narrative makes no mention of professional performance, then there is little point discussing Clara Schumann. Furthermore, by locating the piano girl firmly within her text, socio-historical and musicological knowledge pertaining to that specific situation can reveal far more about the narrative than previously recognised—from discursive repertoire to revelations about characterisation.

The American piano girl's impact was not felt in representations of concert life. Indeed, Huneker's discussion of her was as a historical entity that had little place in twentieth-century musicianship—"the piano is passing and with it the piano girl," he wrote, "and more music was never made before in the land!" (286) He is

enthusiastically celebrating an age when girls played because they wanted to and because they were musical, and that this would raise musical standards no end. For the most part, the musical women in this thesis do not perform in public, and if they do it is not professionally. They are piano girls and form part of that very unfamous, anti-theatrical world of domestic music, but yet they all undermine the ideals of private domesticity—whether from the proto-feminist positions of Fuller, Stoddard and Chopin, or the cultural criticisms of Cooper and James. Indeed, they show a developing consciousness in American literature of the inherent problem with the myth of the piano girl altogether, and confront the issues surrounding its place within American culture.

In Chapter One, “Mad Songs and Absent Pianos: James Fenimore Cooper’s Domestic Music,” I survey and analyse Cooper’s use of feminine music in four novels which span his thirty-year writing career: from his first publication, *Precaution* (1820), through the transatlantic concerns of *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found* (1838), to his last novel, *The Ways of the Hour* (1851). In these novels, Cooper struggles to place his ideals of music and femininity in the American context and I explore his representation of the piano girl in the changing nature of woman’s role in his society. This in part confirms music’s role in the nineteenth-century “Battle of the Sexes” as discussed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *No Man’s Land* (1: 3-62) and the “revision of the Victorian ideology of femininity” (2: xii), but rather than merely revealing “*pro forma* imitations” of femininity as Douglas suggests (5), Cooper’s musical scenes reflect a different aesthetic of domestic music than the stereotype of the piano girl.

In *Precaution*, I locate Cooper’s representation of music within the literary models of both Austen and Sir Walter Scott, and observe distinct American patterns within the supposed elite English setting. Cooper’s ideal of feminine musicianship was later embodied in his character Eve Effingham, and in my analysis of the musical scene aboard *The Montauk* in *Homeward Bound*, a distinctly continental European aesthetic—one consistent with Viennese Biedermeier culture and Jürgen Habermas’s theory of familial domesticity—informs Cooper’s vision of domestic music, not the English performance practice displayed by Austen’s musical characters.

Cooper's insistence on the incompatibility of this musicianship with the ideals of 1830s Jacksonian democracy result in Eve's piano effectively being left by the narrative somewhere in the mid-Atlantic, thus raising important questions about the transplantation of European culture to American society. By his final novel, Cooper's ideal lady pianist is corrupted by the rhetoric of women's rights, and in *The Ways of the Hour* he struggles to locate his piano girl in a modern American context. The potential of music to inspire madness in the weak-minded, hinted at in *Precaution*, becomes a metonym for what Cooper sees as the madness of mid-century women's rights.

The idea that the accomplishment of music might not be immediately suited to American society, and specifically, to the burgeoning settlements of the west, is discussed in Chapter Two, "Margaret Fuller and Music on the Lakes (in 1843)." Fuller was one of the few critics of her time who challenged the practices and expectations of feminine music and proposed a different aesthetic than that promoted in magazines like *Godey's Lady's Book*. This chapter focuses on her ideological call in a largely ignored extract from *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* to dispense with the piano as an accomplishment and look to music as art.

In the first part of my chapter, I place Fuller's writings within the socio-historic context of feminist readings of western expansion and also, very briefly consider how the transportation of the piano to new settlements has become a familiar trope in recent years of "otherness" in the colonial project. In terms of depictions of the hardships of settler women, I contextualise Fuller's response to life on the Illinois prairie with Caroline Kirkland's fictional accounts of a Michigan settlement in the 1840s, and consider how *Summer on the Lakes* relates to Laura Ingalls Wilder's very musical account of prairie life in *Little House on the Prairie*.

I then link Fuller's practical concerns about the restrictions of feminine music with her promotion of art music in the cultural centres of Boston and New York. Informed by her Transcendentalist and German Romantic ideals, Fuller called for a new music to suit the new environment and society of the burgeoning western settlement, which ultimately clashed with the accepted mode of domestic musicianship and the developing ideology of domesticity in American society. Although *Summer on the Lakes* is not, strictly speaking, fiction, it is a poetic



response to her travels in the midwest, and the structure represents her poetic approach to music as a tool of inspiration for the new nation, irreducible from both Fuller's feminist writings and her European-focussed music criticism.

Fuller's call for a new American musical voice that transcended gender and social expectations was certainly not heeded in the nineteenth century, and in Chapter Three, "Music, Fashion and Self-Reliance in Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*," I look at Stoddard's depiction of feminine music as a feature of art and consumerism in her 1862 novel *The Morgesons*. The piano girl is an unavoidable feature of New England feminine education, but the two central characters, Cassandra and Veronica Morgeson, approach it in very different and subjective ways.

Domestic music is not idealised as a practice separate from the consumerism of the upwardly mobile middle-class family, and the piano is revealed as a key signifier and starting point for a discussion of *The Morgesons* as an economic text. My analysis relies on a little known economic theory of fashion by the Victorian economist Caroline Foley, through which the inherent dichotomy between the piano's role as an object of fashion and a tool for Romantic self-expression can be theorised. In *The Morgesons*, the piano is a powerful symbolic object of bourgeois status in Bourdieuan terms, and the myth of the piano girl is both celebrated and utterly manipulated by the central "characterless" character Cassandra.

In Chapter Four, "An American *jeune fille* at the piano: Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*," the American piano girl is taken to Europe once more. James's novel is the most canonical in this thesis, and I analyse from a new perspective how the piano and feminine music is integral to the plot and intentions of the novel. Avoiding the critical tendency to see only the exceptional musicianship of Madame Merle, I place her performance at Gardencourt within the context of Isabel Archer's piano-playing and musical reception, and Pansy Osmond's restricted piano girl musicianship.

The American piano girl here becomes a figure of renunciation, and music represents a cultural symbol that is losing its currency, particularly in the socio-sexual market of marriage. Transatlantic values play an important part in James's depiction of Victorian musicianship, but I also introduce into this analysis the

discursive nature of repertoire and how the 1908 authorial amendment from Beethoven to Schubert in the Gardencourt scene reinforces James's bleak vision for the piano girl. Through the critical commonplace of discussing Isabel's receptive abilities in terms of her Emersonian belief in the essential self, I show how her response to Merle's music and influence reveals a failure to see her own complicity in the patterns of musicianship manipulated by Merle, which tragically control Pansy. In James's larger textual concern with nineteenth-century womanhood, the novel leaves the piano girl in the renunciatory world of the convent, suggesting that strict adherence to the stereotype of feminised, domestic music is incompatible with modern life.

The discursive nature of repertoire is further developed in the final chapter, "Chopin's *Preludes*: Repertoire and Audience in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*." This is the most obviously musical of all the novels discussed in this thesis, and I look at how Edna Pontellier's awakening to music and the narrative can be further analysed in terms of repertoire. More than simply an internal signature of the author, as suggested by Elaine Showalter (47), or a response to the social fears about the influence of Romantic music on the minds of women, Frédéric Chopin's complex gendered reception in his own lifetime, and the myths surrounding his music in the late nineteenth century, offer significant explanations and meanings to the themes in *The Awakening*.

Using Lawrence Kramer's musicological principle in *Music as Cultural Practice 1800-1900* that works of music have discursive meaning and that "[m]eaning is an irrepressibly volatile thing" (2), I analyse the significance of Chopin's preludes in the narrative. In the most interdisciplinary discussion of the thesis, I address how music and representation of musical performance have far-reaching consequences for how we read Chopin's depiction of late-nineteenth-century artistry and subjectivity amongst women. *The Awakening* actively engages with several musical experiences available to women in the late nineteenth century, but her treatment of Edna's awakening shows that these still relied on very fixed and restrictive ideas of womanhood and woman's capacity for self-expression. Through Edna's refusal to conform to these restrictions, Chopin effectively heralds the passing of the piano girl from American literature.



## Chapter 1

### Mad Songs and Absent Pianos: James Fenimore Cooper's Domestic Music

For James Fenimore Cooper's biographer, James Grossman, "nothing can adequately explain how the American Scott made the mistake of beginning his career as the American Austen" (21). In *Precaution* (1820), a novel Grossman rejects as an "overloaded overtold tale" about "managed marriage" in the English aristocracy, Cooper's debt to Jane Austen is unquestionable (21).<sup>1</sup> *Precaution* was supposedly written out of contempt for a sentimental novel,—a now legendary episode has Cooper throwing aside a new publication from England, exclaiming, "I can write you a better book than that myself" and promptly rising to his wife's challenge "to make good his boast" (Hastings 20)—and George E. Hastings's study from 1940 names Jane Austen as the most likely inspiration, thereby "breaking the time-honored tradition that one of Mrs. Opie's stories was the source of Cooper's novel" (39).<sup>2</sup> The structural similarities with Austen convinced him that "in *Precaution* [Cooper] attempted an 'elaborate imitation in plot and character' of a definite English novel, and that novel is Jane Austen's *Persuasion*" (51).

In the study of women and music in nineteenth-century literature, any comparison of an author with Austen can imply a narrative emphasis on musicality not immediately apparent in the works of Cooper. After all, Patrick Piggott in *The Innocent Diversion* (1979) considers Austen's novels to include perhaps the most accurate depiction of musical life within the English gentry of the Regency period:

We may be sure that Jane Austen would not have made such liberal use of music in her work if it had not been a very noticeable feature of her world, for few important writers have recorded with a more scrupulous accuracy the manners and tastes of the middle classes of their time. (2)

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Lawson-Peebles has been forthcoming in his criticism of the "dismissal of *Precaution* as a false start in Cooper's career" ("Fenimore Cooper" 126) and what he calls the "Americanising agenda" of critics that ignores how the social mores of *Precaution* act as rude model for his later American works (125). His analysis exposes an unwillingness in other critics to reconcile Cooper, the good American Democrat with the aristocratic hierarchy of *Precaution*, and suggests that "if we replace 'the good duke' and his castle with a good landlord and his manor-house, we are left with an image which would remain Cooper's ideal" (126).

<sup>2</sup> In the second of three somewhat conflicting accounts of the "genesis of *Precaution*" from 1883, Susan Fenimore Cooper suggests "one of Mrs. Opie's or one of that school" as her father's inspiration (Hastings 21). Nevertheless, as Lawson-Peebles writes, these stories may only be true on a "superficial level" and Cooper most likely began writing for financial reasons ("Property" 60).

Austen's novels are full of music and most of her heroines play the piano: "their playing, and sometimes even their instruments, are skilfully woven into the stories of their joys and sorrows" (Piggott 2). Some, like Anne Elliot in *Persuasion*, play extremely well, others less so; and Austen's representation of feminine musicianship is varied and individual to particular characters. Rather than music being simply that "innocent diversion" condoned by Mr. Collins in *Pride and Prejudice* (77), Austen's novels demonstrate that music was so much a part of the lives of all girls in her society that its innocence was entirely dependent on the individual. The piano was ubiquitous in her world, but the reader is alert to its aliveness as a conduit of culture, femininity and self-expression.

Following this line of logic, contemporary American literature suggests that domestic music of the sort Austen participated in was considerably less common in the New World. Pianos and piano girls are few and far between, and as discussed in the Introduction, they appear only fleetingly in works of the period. Cooper's piano girls are equally sporadic, and on first reading seem nothing more than inert signifiers of the convention that a lady is musical because society expects her to be so. Accordingly, criticism has almost entirely ignored musical episodes in the novels. Even criticism of *The Ways of the Hour* (1850) and its extremely musical heroine ignores the potent performative force of music, although one critic does acknowledge that Mary Monson's musical accomplishments are "almost enough to hang her" (House 36).

By surveying and analysing the musical vignettes from four novels encompassing Cooper's literary career and their importance in the characterisation of the respective female characters—Grace Chatterton in *Precaution*, Eve Effingham in *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found* (1838) and Mary Monson in *The Ways of the Hour*—I will locate Cooper's sense of domestic musicianship, its European and literary antecedents, and the way in which it relates to his representation of women and American cultural life. When music enters Cooper's fictions, it is a critical tool for the inquiry of culture and a symbol for elite feminine values that I will argue has ramifications for how we read the novels. Cooper's vision of domestic womanhood does not conform to either Austen's world or the model of domesticity promoted in the United States during the middle years of the nineteenth century, and

consequently, the stereotype of the piano girl does not necessarily match his musical characters. Rather than “*pro forma* imitations of conventional models,” to use Ann Douglas’s phrase (6), his musical characters depict distinct cultural practices and fundamentally challenge the convention in American life of domestic music as a benign, feminised activity.

Furthermore, Cooper’s narratives reveal an agency in music that follows a domestic model perfected by Austen, but Grossman may have been relieved to discover, they also show that he was more than a little indebted to Sir Walter Scott. Although his ideal woman, embodied in Eve Effingham, plays the piano, the novels I analyse in this chapter betray an uneasiness about music that is hard to contain within the boundaries of Cooper’s domestic settings, and to maintain according to the expectations of American society. The characters only play their pianos under strict conditions, if at all, and the piano seems to have no place in American cultural life. Furthermore, music has the potential to be a dangerous influence on the minds of young women, illustrating, as Hastings also observes, the influence in Cooper’s writing of Scott’s use of balladry and his “impressive singers of mad songs” (40). I will extend this observation further and show that these occasional suggestions of wild Celtic wailings are intrinsically linked to his more conventional images of the piano girl and their largely absent and confined pianos.

“Grace Chatterton both sang and played exquisitely,” or so Cooper tells us in *Precaution* (98). Yet in the course of the novel, Cooper allows the secondary female character in his novel only to sing. Nevertheless, her natural and exquisite singing achieves the long-desired event of a proposal from John Moseley. In a story intended to educate parents on the responsibility of arranging prudent marriages for their children, without the appearance of unseemly management, the course of true love does not run smoothly for John and Grace. Indeed, it is John Moseley who most obviously heeds the advice given in Cooper’s title, by exercising great precaution in his affection for Grace Chatterton. Her mother, Lady Chatterton, is a ghastly woman with all the crassness and none of the comedic value of Jane Austen’s Mrs. Bennet, and she too often interferes in a relationship that was already bound by mutual affection.



In the end the couple are happily married, but the nature of their engagement is most fascinating in regard to Cooper's ambiguous representation of musical performance. Cooper relies on the social conventions of the characters "making love" through music to convey the passion of Moseley's proposal, but he also uses it as the most damning moment in the novel towards accomplishment-based education and its role in calculated marital unions.

Grace's elder sister Kate has recently married a wealthy nobleman. Lord Herriefield is neither virtuous nor pleasant company, but he has a title and a fortune and the union is the direct result of their mother's artful planning. Similarly, Lady Chatterton's embarrassing and obvious machinations allow John and Grace to be alone together. John's sudden arrival, just as the family are preparing for a shopping trip to Bath, is ample justification for Lady Chatterton to command Grace to stay at home and consult an imaginary headache. Thus, she is a catalyst in their engagement, but also for Kate's unhappy future as Lady Herriefield. When Lord Herriefield notices his new bride's "careless disregard" for her mother's interfering, as if it was "too much a matter of course" (98), he asks himself in horror, "[i]s it possible I have been taken in, after all?" (97). In her need to hurry along an engagement that was going to happen anyway, Lady Chatterton "laid the foundation of years of misery for her eldest daughter; or rather the foundations were already laid in the ill-assorted and heartless, unprincipled union she had laboured with success to effect" (97).

John and Grace, however, are promised a lifetime of happiness because of their natural virtue, marked by the nature of their engagement. Grace, believing herself to be alone, but knowing John will spend the afternoon with her, throws herself down upon a chair and sings a fashionable song. Conforming to the stock image of music as an emblem of a girl's suppressed emotions, the young girl "reveals unsuspected feelings to an indiscreet listener" (Corbin 533); she could not sing in John's presence, as it was "seldom she could sufficiently overcome her desire when John was an auditor, to appear to advantage." Now, "[h]er feelings were in consonance with the words, and Grace was very happy both in execution and voice" (98). Of course, John is very much there to hear Grace sing, and in the safe morality of Cooper's novel, he is blameless of any possible indiscreet listening.

John had reached the back of her seat before she was at all sensible of his return, and Grace lost her self-command immediately. She rose

and took a seat on the sofa, and the young man was immediately at her side. (98)

As expected, the usual questions, professions of love and seemingly irrelevant compliments to the lady's mother are exchanged, and the couple are blissfully engaged.

When compared with the didactic representation of feminine accomplishments in the rest of the novel, Cooper narrates this musical scene with an ease and conviction that belies Grace's implied conventional musicianship. As I will discuss in due course, the only other musical character in *Precaution* is the insane Francis Denbigh, which immediately implies something less than ideal about Grace's natural expression of song, but also significant is the narrative's assertion that Emily Moseley, the heroine of the novel, is not musical.

The daughter of a baronet—and the sister of the aforementioned John—Emily is a young lady of independent fortune, and in keeping with Cooper's ideal American girl later fictionalised in Elizabeth Temple and Eve Effingham, “[s]he was artless, but intelligent; cheerful, with a deep conviction of the necessity of piety; and uniform in her practice of all the important duties” (34). In the tradition of the “celebrated woodenness of his heroines” (Grossman 23), Emily epitomises Kay Seymour House's definition of the Cooper female as “both insubstantial and unchangeable” (29).

Emily has no taste for music, so her aunt and mentor, Mrs. Charlotte Wilson, dissuades her from dedicating “the time which would have been thrown away in endeavouring to cultivate a talent she did not possess” (34).

Mrs. Wilson entertained a great abhorrence of what is commonly called accomplishments in a woman; she knew that too much of that precious time, which could never be recalled, was thrown away in endeavouring to acquire a smattering in what, if known, could never be of use to the party, and what can never be well known but to a few, whom nature, and long practice have enable to conquer. (55)

Emily is naturally inclined towards painting and this talent is cultivated—safely within the culturally designated expectations that a woman may copy with “neatness and accuracy” (55), but never interpret or recreate in the Romantic sense of artistic expression. Cooper seems here to be agreeing with writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Susanna Rowson in their criticism of accomplishment-based education without

recourse to practical concerns, but rather than merely wasting time, the novel implies that one must exercise (pre)caution with music.<sup>3</sup>

In his important comparison of *Precaution* with Austen's *Persuasion*, Hastings reads Emily as a reworking of Anne Eliot (29). He likens Anne's musical ability in translating the meaning of Italian songs at a performance in Bath (*Persuasion* 151), with Emily's artistic skill at faithfully sketching the "beauties of nature" (*Precaution* 55). However, knowledge of Italian songs is only one feature of Anne's musicianship, and unlike music in Austen's novel, Emily's art is not interwoven by Cooper into the narrative agency. Furthermore, her artistic skills do not have an active function in her society, and they seem to provide no personal fulfilment. In *Persuasion* however, Anne playing country dances at the Musgroves' is not only a historically appropriate representation of how a spinster could contribute to the social fabric of her community, but more importantly, it allows Anne to avoid unnecessary contact with Captain Frederick Wentworth. Austen also clearly shows that Anne, "very much preferring the office of musician to a more active post," uses music as a retreat into herself and her memories (43):

She knew that when she played she was giving pleasure only to herself; but this was no new sensation: excepting one short period of her life, she had never, since the age of fourteen, never since the loss of her dear mother, known the happiness of being listened to, or encouraged by any just appreciation or real taste. In music she had been always used to feel alone in the world [...]. (42)

There is no such complexity of performative intent with Emily's artistry, and Cooper rather clumsily grapples with the paradoxical principle that a woman must not "perform" for other's attentions, but her accomplishments must be for the mutual benefit of others and not herself. Morality is a tricky business when it comes to a woman actually doing something, or worse still, performing something, and this later becomes a central concern in *The Ways of the Hour*, but in *Precaution*, Cooper avoids the issue altogether with Emily. Yet, despite outward signs to the contrary, his

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<sup>3</sup> The question of whether an innocent and moral woman can create works of art or merely copy is famously depicted by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Marble Faun* (1860). When Hilda seemingly reproduces the depth of emotion in her copy of the Beatrice Cenci portrait, Miriam marvels at "how an innocent, delicate, white soul, like yours, has been able to seize the subtle mystery of the portrait; as you surely must, in order to reproduce it so perfectly" (54). Nevertheless, as Susan Manning argues, although the painting "casts doubt on the whole notion of authenticity," Hilda's version lacks "presence" (xxx-xxxi).

narrative manages to let Grace Chatterton slip through this net of convention. At the heart of the very naturalness of her performance is a problematic rebellion against the tradition of nineteenth-century feminine musicianship and Cooper's representation of his female characters. Grace, like mad Francis Denbigh, sings unaccompanied.

Grace effectively attracts her husband-to-be through the feminine accomplishment of musical performance. Cooper's treatment of music as an emblem of girlhood conforms to both the conventional representation of the dutiful daughter at the piano and the equally conventional criticism of performance compromising natural womanly virtue. Grace sings without guile, and in the conventional world of Cooper's novel of manners, it is perfectly acceptable that a young lady would modestly attract her future husband in this way. Lady Chatterton, it can be assumed, deliberately educated her daughters in accomplishments for that sole purpose. Cooper does not mention an instrument, but the ubiquity of the piano in nineteenth-century domestic and feminine music makes it most probable that this is the instrument she plays so exquisitely on other occasions. Furthermore, Grace sings a popular song. She is clearly a modern young lady, aware of fashion and social convention. The reader perceives the socio-sexual market of marriage through the absence of the unnamed instrument and knows how this engagement scene might take place in another novel.

Austen's continual parody of music and courtship throughout *Pride and Prejudice* shows a more sophisticated and nuanced model for Grace's engagement. Elizabeth Bennet woos Darcy most effectively at the piano, but she does not intend to and Austen has clearly made her a more worthy character than those ladies who "perform." Unlike any of Cooper's heroines, Lizzie's playing is less than perfect because she does not practice enough, but it still reflects her good character through her honest performance manner. Austen does not require exquisite technique as a measure for accomplishment. Despite her technical flaws, Lizzie's performance is beautiful to her select audience, especially Darcy: "You have employed your time much better. No one admitted to the privilege of hearing you, can think anything wanting. We neither of us perform to strangers" (135).

Cooper similarly attempts to portray a more idealised form of the courtship performance by removing any notion of calculation on Grace's behalf. She is

unaware of an audience, yet still “performs” her intentions to John Moseley. Seen in this light, Grace’s musical accomplishments have no immediate agency except to confirm her morality and suitability for a happy marriage.

Furthermore, the absence of the piano can also be read as a signifier of Grace’s progression from girlhood to married woman. Once married, Grace turns her attentions to the home and the hereafter, as confirmed later in the novel:

Grace had, of late, reflected more seriously on the subject of her eternal welfare [...] it is a singular fact, that more women feel a disposition to religion soon after marriage, than at any other period of life – and whether it is, that having attained the most important station this life affords the sex, they are more willing to turn their thoughts to a provision for the next. (113)

Musical accomplishments are perhaps unnecessary for married life and her song marks the end of her musical concerns. “[M]arried women,” as Mrs. Elton in *Emma* declares when trying to organise a musical club, “are but too apt to give up music” (217). Grace’s accomplishments have fulfilled their purpose of marriage and having reached the highest goal available to a woman of her class, and as yet without children, the only accomplishment worthy of her attention is Christian study and the influence this will have on her future family.

From a purely instrumental perspective, Grace’s song can also suggest an American sensibility within Cooper’s “English” novel, and may prove a more realistic depiction of early-nineteenth-century American music-making than the practices of the English gentry. The piano was not an especially common instrument in the early American Republic,<sup>4</sup> and unaccompanied singing was a dominant feature of musical life. Nicholas E. Tawa calls the early United States a nation of singers and observes that domestic music logically developed according to commonly available instrumentation.

Whether accompanied with a piano or organ, or no instrument at all, the plain parlor song of early America had no problem communicating with a listener. Interest was concentrated on the melody, on the singer not the accompanist. (*Sweet Songs* 180)

Although Cooper’s vanity may have caused him to believe that all the music rooms of his friends and associates in elite New York society were filled with pianos in accordance with European practices of feminine and domestic music, the piano was

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<sup>4</sup> Approximately 2500 pianos were made in the United States in the 1820s (Tawa, *Sweet Songs* 84).



for most Americans still an instrument of great luxury.

Nevertheless, even within that European tradition of the piano girl, Grace's song is unwittingly reminiscent of folk music and unchecked expression. Music had always been an emotional outlet for literary girls from Clarissa Harlowe to Marianne Dashwood, but they both confine their singing (and crying) to music accompanied by keyboard instruments. In *Sense and Sensibility* Austen was not immune to society's perception that music was a threat to the emotional well-being of a young woman, and Marianne is ultimately checked for her emotional dependency on music and her belief that sensibility sets her apart from her more restrained sister, Elinor. Marianne's music is subdued by heartbreak; Grace's song is silenced by her engagement to John Moseley. Yet, despite Cooper's declarations of Grace's exquisite piano playing and her artlessness, she is expressing herself beyond the womanly expectations Cooper so aspires to: the measured and refined. Abandoning the piano altogether was almost as bad as using it for impromptu music, which, throughout the nineteenth century, society dissuaded female pianists from playing—"The improvising musician in effect 'refuses' to read a musical text that both social convention and cultural practice mark as feminine" (Leppert "Sexual Identity" 119).

While it is foolish to suggest that no girls of the English gentry ever broke into song in a casual and natural manner, it is not a situation fictionalised by Austen. The only character to sing unaccompanied is the shepherd boy in *Emma* who sings for Harriet Smith at the request of her admirer Mr. Martin (23). In that very musical novel, unaccompanied singing is associated with the lower classes and Austen reveals Harriet's fondness for this music as further evidence of her simple outlook on life and society.

Jane Austen's was not an age when folk music was valued by polite society (despite the contemporary fashion for "Scotch songs" and "Irish melodies"), and Harriet's account of musical entertainment provided for her at Abbey Mill Farm will have amused Emma and also pleased her as evidence of her friend's unformed taste and general need for "improvement." (Piggott 79)

Despite being immersed in a didactic narrative contrasting performance and virtue, Cooper momentarily allows Grace a spontaneous overflowing of emotion of Wordsworthian proportions. The traditional medium of domestic music is transformed into Romantic self-expression and a spontaneous love song, which has



unsettling parallels in Francis Denbigh's song of lost love:

And Marian's love and Marian's pride,  
Have crushed the heart that would have died  
    To save my Marian's tears—  
A brother's hand has struck the blow,  
Oh! May that brother never know  
    Such madly sorrowing years! [...] (150)

In the story of George, the Earl of Pendennyss's tragic family history, we hear of the demise of his uncle Francis. At university, he had excelled in music, which is a fundamental feature of his troubled mind. The creative "powers of melody" are aligned with the seductive powers of the sirens, but Cooper is quick to establish that in this family, the siren was male thereby avoiding any suggestion that music could take hold of a woman's internal self (139). Grace may play exquisitely, as is respectable for a young lady, but Francis achieves the appellation of "musician" (150).

He wrote prettily, and would sing these efforts of his muse to music of his own, drawing crowds around his windows, in the stillness of the night, to listen to sounds as melodious as they were mournful. His poetical efforts partook of the distinctive character of the man, being melancholy, wild and sometimes pious. (139)

Francis had been a diffident youth, scarred by small-pox and his father's favouritism of his younger brother George, who ended up marrying the woman he loved. Although he had only indirectly "communicated his feelings" to Marian, he "was crushed by the blow" of rejection (148). On the day of Marian and George's wedding, he disappeared.

Several years later, while travelling through the Lake District, the elder George Denbigh discovered his lost brother. "Clad in the garments of the extremest poverty, with an eye roving in madness, and a body rocking to and fro from mental inquietude," the aristocratic Denbigh sings of his love and pain in a "low, monotonous, but unusually sweet" voice (149-50). Like Grace, Francis sings alone, of his heart's dearest concerns and is unaware of his audience, yet unlike Grace, he is condemned to insanity and death. Recalling Madge Wildfire in *The Heart of Mid-Lothian*, the song foreshadows his death (364-67).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, it is in the gipsy

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<sup>5</sup> "Madge was singing when they entered—singing her own wild snatches of song and forgotten airs, with a voice no longer over-strained by false spirits, but softened saddened, and subdued by bodily exhaustion" (Scott, *The Heart of Mid-Lothian* 364-65).

Meg Merrilies from *Guy Mannering* and her attendance of a dying man that we discover for an even closer source for Cooper's musical scene. Though events in each novel are very different, its similarity of form, confirms the underlying suspicion of the unaccompanied voice and its untamed quality. Cooper's Cumberland setting only reinforces the association with Scott's Celtic mysticism.<sup>6</sup>

She moistened his mouth from time to time with some liquid, and between whiles sung, in a low monotonous cadence, one of those prayers, or rather spells, which, in some parts of Scotland, and the north of England, are used by the vulgar and ignorant to speed the passage of the parting spirit, like the tolling of the bell in catholic days. She accompanied this dismal sound with a slow rocking motion of her body to and fro, as if to keep time with her song. (*Guy Mannering* 144)

Francis Denbigh does not compare in character with Meg Merrilies, that "hag of satan" (397), but the association of balladry and madness is significant. It is the "alien world of mortality and madness" that James D. Wallace shows intrudes on the novels otherwise genteel world (73). At the end of the novel, Pendennyss and his new bride Emily Moseley are secured by a marriage that balances any previous misunderstanding and family tragedy: "Everything spoke society, splendor, and activity without; everything denoted order, propriety, and happiness within" (164). Lawson-Peebles has shown that the conclusion of *Precaution* returns the characters and the environment to a place where "appearances once more 'speak' and 'denote' realities, and they do so in an appropriate environment [...]" ("Property" 66), but as I will discuss below, this ideology can be seen to crumble in *The Ways of the Hour*, when Mary Monson's outward sign of gentility and beauty harbours unhappiness and insanity within.

Returning to Grace, if her song does not suggest madness, it certainly ruffles the mores of Cooper's good society. Cooper presents the secondary female character of *Precaution* as submissive and virtuous, but for a brief moment, she has been left alone with her lover and seems to be brazenly throwing herself on sofas and singing

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<sup>6</sup> The Romantic image of the mad singer who comes from the cultural margins of British society can also be found in William Wordsworth's "The Mad Mother." In this poem, beginning, "[h]er eyes are wild her head is bare,/The sun has burnt her coal-black hair" (ll. 1-2), the mentally unsound young mother, "talked and sung the woods among" (9). Wordsworth explained in a letter to John Kenyon (September 1836), he intended that the woman "came from afar" (Mason 376), but line 10—"And it was in the English tongue,"—confirms that she was "either to be of these Islands, or a North American [...]" the fact of her speaking our language brings us at once into close sympathy with her" (Mason 376).

of her heart's dearest wish. She is of course doing nothing of the sort, as there is no intent of public display, but Cooper is allowing a feminine accomplishment to be a means of self-expression. Grace momentarily becomes a real and vital character who possesses feeling and emotion and her music taps into a different register of experience than convention allows. It suggests that the niceties of drawing-room etiquette, including the piano, are only something you adhere to when someone else is watching.

Cooper represents his heroines as ostensibly virtuous and refined, but his novels can reveal female characters with a wild and independent streak, particularly when they are set against the troublesome American wilderness. *Precaution*, however, is set in an idealised English aristocracy and, unlike Cooper's more famous self-possessed female characters, Elizabeth Temple and Cora Munro, Grace is neither the heroine nor especially interesting. Grace's engagement is in essence a reworking of drawing-room musical courtship and is protected by the safety of the domestic family unit through the husband- and wife-to-be, but it briefly shakes the narrative's conviction of a singular notion of virtuous femininity. Especially in contrast with the ideal of domestic music Cooper establishes in *Eve Effingham*, Grace's engagement reveals a sensibility and subjectivity not entirely contained within Cooper's didacticism. Grace never departs from the social expectations of dutiful daughter and wife, but this musical episode treads lightly upon a dangerous precipice from which Mary Monson will eventually fall.

Eighteen years after the publication of *Precaution*, Cooper returned to domestic music in *Homeward Bound* as part of the characterisation of the heroine, Eve Effingham. On board the New York-bound packet ship, *The Montauk*, little more than twenty-four hours after leaving Portsmouth, a private musical performance takes place in the ladies' cabin, the sole reserve of the Effingham family.

Music succeeded this conversation, Eve having taken the precaution to have the piano tuned before quitting port, an expedient we would recommend to all who have a regard for the instrument that extends beyond its outside, or even for their own ears. John Effingham executed brilliantly on the violin; and, as it appeared on inquiry, the two younger gentlemen performed respectably on the flute, flageolet, and one or two other wind instruments. We shall leave them doing great justice to Beethoven, Rossini, and Mayerbeer (*sic.*), whose

compositions Mr. Dodge did not fail to sneer at in the outer cabin, as affected and altogether unworthy of attention, and return on deck to the company of the anxious master (66).

Cooper's views of European life had been shaped by seven years abroad and the English sentimental model of domestic music touched on in *Precaution* gives way to a more European sensibility, infused with notions of the Parisian opera, but, perhaps surprisingly, more reminiscent of the Viennese Biedermeier period of the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> The Effingham family, although American by birth, have gained a cosmopolitan outlook from over a decade living abroad, and Eve herself is uncertain of how to define their transatlantic situation, observing that they and their friends on board *The Montauk* are "a party of Parisians, Viennois, Romans, or by whatever name we may be properly styled" (*Homeward Bound* 181). Their repertoire includes the popular works of the day, especially the craze for Parisian opera on both sides of the Atlantic, but Cooper's narrative veils the Effinghams' performance in the decorum of familial privacy—a privacy that contradicts the demagogue Mr. Dodge's own vision of democratic American values—and we may look to Vienna for this performance practice model: Not the girl at the drawing room piano so representative of the English Regency, nor the outwardly looking and publicly minded Parisian salons, but rather a musical tradition focussed on the private entertainments of the bourgeois family.

The Biedermeier artistic and literary movement was characterised by an anti-politicised, middle-class, and domestic sensibility, and embodied musically in the "shy and private Franz Schubert surrounded by his renowned intimate circle" (Solie 119). Wagner declared this the ideal of German music, writing in 1840 that, "[t]he German cannot impart his musical transports to the mass, but only to the most familiar circle of his friends" (Wagner 91). Ruth Solie explains that "[d]omesticity is here invoked as a token or outward sign of genuineness, sincerity, heartfulness—and, of course, of "real" musicality" (118).

In *Homeward Bound* and *Home as Found*, novels concerned with returning home from Europe to find one's homeland changed politically and socially, Cooper grapples with the problem of how this European social and cultural sensibility can be

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<sup>7</sup> The Biedermeier period is generally dated as the years between the 1815 Vienna Congress and the 1848 European revolutions.

transplanted to the burgeoning economic power of Andrew Jackson's United States. In the wider issues of the novel, it is women who suffer the most in this developing society, but in Cooper's representation of music, that most feminine of domestic occupations, the seachange effected by the crossing of the Atlantic prevents not only this form of domestic music to take hold in America, but also the private ideals of the entire family unit.

Eve Effingham is the idealised centre of the novels and she is musical. She has spent her youth in Europe, being educated according to elite European norms and is an accomplished young lady. Eve is in theory "Cooper's ideal 'American girl'" as defined by Mary Suzanne Schriber. She combines the "freshness, simplicity and innocence that are unmistakably American with the polish and manner of Europe, thereby guaranteeing to American society the needed moral influence of woman's nature" (238). However, the American society of *Home as Found* is incompatible with this ideal heroine.

You have been taught music in general, by seven masters of as many different states, besides the touch of the guitar by a Spaniard; Greek by a German; the living tongues by the European powers, and philosophy by seeing the world; and now with a brain full of learning, fingers full of touches, eyes full of tints, and a person full of grace, your father is taking you back to America to waste your sweetness on the desert air. (7-8)

With the cynical, and momentarily foreboding comments of Eve's cousin John Effingham, Cooper establishes a premise which declares the liberty of America potentially unattainable for an accomplished and well-bred young lady: "After having passed a girlhood of wholesome restraint in the national society of Europe, you are about to return home to the slavery of American female life, just as you are about to be married!" (8)

Cooper presents Eve as educated beyond anything possible in the United States, indeed beyond anything possible in any society. She is certainly not a heroine in the vein of Emma Woodhouse who is "faultless in spite of all her faults" (Austen 340), but rather an extraordinary character, capable of cheerfully withstanding Atlantic storms and skilfully acting as the voice of Cooper's views, while still being the very essence of refined womanhood. House declares in "Fenimore Cooper's Heroines" (written in 1982 with Genevieve Belfiglio), that Cooper "likes women,



which may be a better compliment to the sex than loving them would. Rarely does it occur to him that a woman cannot do almost anything that needs to be done" (42). She describes Eve as "flexible, disinterested, and capable of making decisions based on principle (50), and representative of her wider reading of Cooper's heroines:

Paradoxically, it was only when a well-educated heroine invaded what was most eminently a man's world (ships, battlefields, forests, frontier settlements) that she acquired physical presence and complexity of character. (House, *Cooper's Americans* 39)

Therefore, musicianship, though essential to Cooper's accomplished, ideal lady, lacks a sense of agency in his heroine's narrative. In direct contrast to the natural order he espouses, that "the drawing-room is a lady's empire" (*Home as Found* 152), and in spite of all claims of her artistic superiority, when it comes to music in the American context, Eve is unable to freely "enrich" her life within that domain (or sphere) of the drawing-room. And her piano never makes it across the Atlantic.

Central to House's reading of the Effingham novels is an understanding of sentimentality in keeping with Ann Douglas's *The Feminization of American Culture*, but as Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, it was D. H. Lawrence who established the reading of works by "such classic American authors as Crèvecoeur, Cooper, Poe and Hawthorne as accounts of embattled masculinity" (1:145)—Lawrence perceived in the "sheer tension" of their "shrieks" for liberty that the American Eagle was a "Hen-Eagle" (17). A reading no doubt inspired by Henry James's horror on returning to the United States in 1904 and discovering what he believed to be a "women-made society" (*American Scene* 347). "It needs little contact with American life to perceive how she *has* pounced" he wrote, "and how, outside business, she has made it over in her image" (354).

Seventy years earlier, Cooper had a similar response to the "division of duties in American life that assigns to men the job of making money and tending to business while the women are supposed to take care of everything else" (House and Belfiglio 49), but it was women's incapability to meet their cultural responsibilities that caused his greatest concern. He declares in *Home as Found* that the lives of even the most elite woman are subject to domestic drudgery because American males "consider a wife or a daughter a mere upper servant" (1), and that the job of



civilizing the nation was being left to women like Mrs. Legend with her literary *soirées* who were not suitably equipped to succeed in this task.

Given the importance of music as a feature of feminine education during the nineteenth century, there is surprisingly little regard in *Home as Found* to the role of music in the cultural lives of American women. Despite Eve's mention of her desire for an opera in New York City (54) and the amused titterings of the Effinghams on Independence Day at the expense of the Templeton instrumental music—"certainly the weakest side of American civilization" (311)—music plays no role in Cooper's depiction of this supposedly feminised American cultural life. Musical institutions, such as the opera and professional orchestras were still in their infancy in 1830s New York, but given the sociological and historical record of domestic music and its overt feminisation, music in *Home as Found* seems conspicuous by its absence. As European music influenced the repertoire choices of countless American girls, it seems neglectful that Cooper would not deign to satirise the musicianship of New York's lady pianists in the same way he did Mrs. Legend's literary guests or the American belle, Miss Ring.

For instance, the success of Rossini's staged oratorio *Mosè in Egitto* in 1835 led a writer in the *American Musical Journal* to hope that young ladies would "leave the march of *Mosé* [*sic*] alone for some short time,—an event devoutly to be prayed for by any man who has the misfortune to live in the neighborhood of a pianoforte in New-York" (111). Music's absence suggests either a sentimental unwillingness on the part of Cooper to taint music with "the hapless piano-playing daughters of the bourgeoisie" (Solie 123), or more likely, a different notion of domestic music altogether. If we return to John Effingham's description of Eve's education, music is immediately set up as a European concern, encompassing the many states of Europe, but only attaining a legitimate American voice in the Effingham family's performance on board *The Montauk*. This is not a recreation of the bourgeois daughter hammering away at the keyboard to fulfil social norms of accomplishment or to show herself up-to-date with the musical fashion, but rather Eve the daughter-pianist as a unifying part of a patriarchal family ensemble.

Cooper takes great pains to prove his heroine musical by including a piano in her cabin which resembled "a tasteful boudoir, rather than that of an apartment in a

cramped and vulgar ship" (60). The narrator self-consciously maintains the French term, *boudoir*, to emphasize the elite European interior of Eve's private space, despite her being on a boat. She is musical because social norms dictate a lady must be musical and the piano is appropriate to her sex, but her piano is not merely a piece of furniture to denote feminine merit and social status. Eve actually plays it and keeps it in tune. The Effinghams perform with great skill, in keeping with Cooper's clumsy narrative feature that virtue must be equated with excellence, and the three composers mentioned read like a "Who's Who" of European music: Beethoven, the great master of German music, joined by Rossini and Meyerbeer, two of the most prominent composers of French opera from the period.

However, far from being a sign of great musical taste, transcriptions of operatic arias formed a large part of popular domestic music, on both sides of the Atlantic.

By mid-century all respectable, upkeeping, well-off families in northern Europe and northern America harboured living-room pianos. Daughters and wives, by belabouring them with shavings from *William Tell*, *La Juive*, *Norma*, and *Lucia di Lammermoor*, were exhaling faint dilutions of the glorious vapor of Paris. (Loesser 362)

One imagines the party reading through transcriptions of *William Tell*, in remembrance of the "*Grand Opéry*" so despised by Steadfast Dodge (128). The Grand Opera in Paris had become a public and economic success only in the 1830s and with spectacular and lavish performances of works such as Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots* in 1836, suddenly the opera and "its lobby, became Paris"—and so Europe's—primary focus of 'high society':

[...] rich-looking, rich-sounding, rich-feeling events for their rivals and emulators, their dependents and their worshipers, as well as the remnant of old-regime nobles who helped to decorate their triumph. (Loesser 357-8)

It is little wonder that Dodge, the representative of the Jacksonian democracy Cooper criticises, with his penchant for committees and surveys, found the posturing of the Parisian opera inferior to that of American congregational church singing. His political and musical Presbyterianism may amuse the Effinghams, but if music is only associated with the display of wealth and spectacle, there is some sense in his conclusion that, "if *this* be music, then do I know nothing about it!" (128). In this light, *Homeward Bound* is at danger of seemingly at cross-purposes, with the

Effinghams' half recreating the Hajji emulation of mock-European ways Cooper goes on to parody in *Home as Found*, all the while set apart in the narrative as the representatives of true artistic sensibility.

Cooper however, does not attribute any moral authority to Dodge's complaints, and wholly criticises the demagogue's vision of democratic values. He wrote in *The American Democrat* (1838), that "[t]he tendencies of democracies is, in all things to mediocrity since the tastes, knowledge and principles of the majority form the tribunal of appeal" (129). Nevertheless, for Cooper, it was the power of the politicised individual who is at most fault in such circumstances: "[t]he peculiar office of a demagogue," he wrote, "is to advance his own interests, by affecting a deep devotion to the interests of the people" (*American Democrat* 154), and Dodge's musical complaints are ultimately reduced to personal opinion rather than the democratic needs of the ship.

The music is not a recreation of operatic splendour, but the performance of the music unto itself, and one that refuses to play to the expectations of any other sensibility. Refusing to conform to the "tyranny of public opinion" (*American Democrat* 130), the Effinghams perform a domestic music that has at its core the ideals of family and property, and in this regard is part of a wider theme in Cooper's novels described by Lawson-Peebles as "benevolent paternalism fusing the values of family, property, and an organic community" ("Fenimore Cooper" 125). As with Eve's intimate conversations with Mrs. Hawker in *Home as Found*, Cooper and the Effinghams equate good society with the private expression of cultivation amongst equals. Their performance transcends the political concerns of Dodge and the earlier conversation surrounding Mr. Blunt's mysterious national origins, to establish the privatisation of the family apart from the societal microcosm onboard *The Montauk*.

The family fulfils Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the educated and propertied "public of music lovers," who, from the end of the eighteenth century, were able to utilise the art music of the day for both their public and private requirements: "Released from its function in the service of social representation, art became an object of free choice and of changing preference" (Habermas 39-40). Display is devalorised and the commodity of music is lifted from its public space—in this case the Parisian Grand Opera—to "the enclosed space of the patriarchal conjugal family"

(Habermas 46), wherein the Effinghams can declare their “family’s self-image as a sphere of humanity-generating closeness,” effectively performing “the ideas of freedom, love, and cultivation of the person” (Habermas 48).

This performance sensibility is the ethical equivalent of Anne Eliot playing for her own pleasure, but what distinguishes it from Jane Austen is that the gentlemen play instruments, albeit masculine ones—the violin, flute and flageolet. In describing the musical expectations of her own society, Austen has only two gentlemen musicians in her novels. It is noteworthy for English attitudes towards domestic and amateur music that these two characters are the rake Willoughby in *Sense and Sensibility* and the rather immature Frank Churchill in *Emma*. Otherwise, as Piggott notes, “[t]he men in Jane Austen’s novels do not play, or if they do they keep quiet about it” (3).<sup>8</sup>

For the English middle and upper-classes, music was of the feminine sphere and although it may be acceptable for a gentleman to appreciate music and perhaps sing duets on occasion, further musical study suggested that a young man had “frittered away valuable time developing ungentlemanly accomplishments” (Libin 23). By the nineteenth century, music was a problematic signifier of wealth and social status because the very act of playing music “required a physical act to be repeated over and over again,” thus blurring the separation between gentlemanly leisure and the occupations of the labouring classes (Leppert, *Music* 20). This understanding raises questions as to why the English Mr. Sharp (later revealed as Sir George Templemore) is a performer, and why Eve’s father is not part of the ensemble. Perhaps John Effingham, with his dissolute past and who “kept his gold in corporations, that were as soulless as himself” (*Homeward Bound* 6), may therefore have squandered his time studying the violin.

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<sup>8</sup> The flageolet was a precursor to the modern tin whistle and a popular amateur instrument in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe—famously played by Samuel Pepys. Richard Leppert notes that, “[d]uring the eighteenth century it was in fact principally used by women as a device for teaching canaries and linnets to sing” (*Music and Image* 150), and he knows of “no image of an adult male using the instrument” (150). In *Gleanings from Europe: England*, Cooper refers to street musicians playing the flageolet (284), but the inclusion of the instrument in *Homeward Bound* suggests an American understanding of domestic musicianship. The instrument was very popular in Colonial America, reflecting the predominance of folk music in cultural life. Furthermore, the association of wind instruments with military bands reinforced its status as a masculine instrument. For instance, an 1835 story from *Godey’s Lady’s Book* includes a flageolet-playing character called Strange Mary—her strangeness confirmed by her playing of a “masculine” woodwind instrument (Koza 108).

Nevertheless, there are echoes in this scene of the elite amateur music in Colonial America—reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson’s gatherings with the likes of Francis Hopkinson and Robert Carter to play through chamber music<sup>9</sup>—and distinct similarities with a musical episode in Brockden Brown’s “A Series of Original Letters,” published in the *Weekly Magazine* from April to June, 1798.

A party of her friends are invited for the evening, who are to be entertained with a little concert. It is to be opened with an ode in honour of the day, written by your sister Mary. It is set to music, and is sung by Betsy Hadwin, who has a soft and melodious voice. Your Mary is to touch the keys of the Piano, A Mr. Beddoes to accompany us on the German flute. (*The Rhapsodist* 113)

Cooper’s musical scene reflects a performance practice common among the elite society of the early American Republic, which is significantly different to the music found in Austen’s novels and also to the cultural habits of 1830s United States. This is especially pertinent to Cooper’s critique of the Jacksonian democracy of Steadfast Dodge, but the eighteenth-century legacy is not the only musical influence in this performance and one must look also to Eve’s claim that her party could be called “Viennois” (181).

In early-nineteenth-century Vienna, music was universally held in higher esteem than perhaps any other city in the world: “Music, especially instrumental music, then, was a highly honorific indoor sport in Vienna; any Viennese understood that it was something the best people cultivated in a big way” (Loesser 119). Whereas a musical gentleman in England was viewed by a suspicious society as effeminate, he was considered to have an advantageous pastime in Biedermeier Vienna. Young men were encouraged to learn music because it was a fashionable thing to do and because it was an important “recommendation in good society” (Loesser 138).

In the years after the Napoleonic wars, Alice M. Hanson writes, “the

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<sup>9</sup> The musical correspondence of Jefferson and Francis Hopkinson is well known and Loesser speculates that Jefferson first saw a piano at the musical residence of Colonel Robert Carter, another resident of Virginia. (441). John Ogasapian describes the importance of music in Republican American thus: “the cultured gentleman engaging in genteel pursuits, musical accomplishments, and also developing the patriotic and independent principles of the new Republic” (119). Cooper’s novel idealises inherited wealth and status, and implies that in its truest form, those born into aristocracy are naturally endowed with talent and virtue. The Effinghams, like Cooper himself maintains his status through the perhaps arguable doctrine that “[g]entility was the art of seeing the common in others and repressing it in yourself” (Alan Taylor 302).



Viennese home, and particularly its parlor, was the focus of family, social and intellectual life" (109), and her descriptions of Biedermeier parlour entertainments have significant parallels with the Effinghams' performance and their later sociability with Mrs. Hawker and Mrs. Bloomfield:

In contrast to the formality and opulence of aristocratic or financiers' salons, bourgeois salons were small, informal, congenial gatherings which met primarily for entertainment [...]. A genuine love of music along with the prominence accorded music by society accounts for the large number of musical amateurs and private concerts in Vienna. (Hanson 117-18)

This cultural locus is further reinforced in the Effinghams' performance by Solie's analysis of the Biedermeier understanding of domestic music:

This new domesticity has at its heart the representation of a particular mood or atmosphere suffusing the home, a profound comfort and order to which the appropriate response is a kind of worshipful gratitude, and which is provided in particular for the paterfamilias by the other members of the family. (Solie 126)

Biedermeier does not describe a particular genre of music (although Schubert is typically the composer who is seen to best represent this historical period), but characterises "a coherent system of values associated with domesticity and with the activities, including the music, found in the home" (Solie 126). It places the father instead of the daughter, at the centre of musical and domestic expression. Returning to Wagner's highly idealised construct of domestic German performance, music becomes the family's heartfelt expression for each other and the culture to which they subscribe and "only the observance of the approved rules and regulations of family life will guarantee musical success" (Solie 135).

Therefore, Eve is highly accomplished because her father has fulfilled his responsibilities to her, and in turn, she performs her role of the dutiful daughter. The piano is rightly Eve's, and as the pianist she is the structural centre of the music, but she is part of a chamber ensemble. Despite all the authorial intention of aristocratic values, in the context of the narrative, this ensemble is a symbol for the nineteenth-century bourgeois family.

The performance is for the mutual benefit of all the musicians. It is not a vehicle through which Eve can present her musical talents to the young gentlemen, Messrs. Sharp and Blunt (who is later revealed as the American Paul Powis), but a



collective diversion in which they can all participate. Indeed, there is no real audience, save Edward Effingham, Mademoiselle Viefville and Eve's nanny, "all who properly belonged to the place" and the intimate circle of the family (60). Even the narrative voice compels the reader to "leave them doing great justice" to the music and retire from the role of audience (66). Steadfast Dodge is consigned to the outer cabin, and from a safe distance disapproves of the European repertoire with a couple of other passengers who have also "taken great offence that the Effinghams should presume to retire into their cabin, and particularly that they should have the extreme aristocratic audacity to shut the door" (65).

This scene acts as a direct parallel to the episode in *Home as Found* about the disputed fishing point on the Effinghams' land in Templeton. The wants of the general public, based on their understanding of democratic principles, infringe on the legal property rights of the Effingham family and their belief in the "claims of individuality" (*American Democrat* 229). Cooper wrote in *The American Democrat* that the American public "considered the sway of numbers as the only criterion of freedom" and feared that "[t]here is getting to be so much publick right, that the private right is overshadowed" (228-29). For the people of Templeton, their claim to the land lies in their belief that "it is the common tradition of the whole country" to use it and their displeasure that "Mr. John Effingham has talked of giving private entertainments on the Point" (*Home as Found* 207). Here "the needs of bourgeois society" are at odds with the "family's self image as a sphere of humanity-generating closeness" (Habermas 48), and Cooper links the protection of private space with his presentation of music as an intimate entertainment removed from the demands of wider society and common tradition.

The musical performance on *The Montauk* is an isolated episode in *Homeward Bound* and the characters never perform again. Eve does not even appear to even have a piano in New York or Templeton. The storm on the Atlantic and the adventures of *The Montauk* put an end to domestic music and musically America is not so much a place of musical slavery for women, but a space that silences music as a private means of artistic expression for the Effingham family. However, this scene foreshadows the concluding events of *Home as Found*. Mr. Sharp and Mr. Blunt are not merely cultivated gentlemen, but true members of the Effingham's intimate

circle. As Sir George Templemore, future husband of Grace van Cortlandt, and Paul Powis, son of John Effingham and future husband of Eve, they complete the family unit. Eve, the daughter-pianist is the centre, but John Effingham is the leader. Edward Effingham merely sanctions the performance. Here, we see the first hints in the narrative that John will rightly call his young cousin "Daughter Eve" (*Home as Found* 409) and where Paul becomes both his father's son and Eve's husband.

Eve's performance never transgresses the boundaries of her family and the great constant of this "natural law" of the conjugal paternal family is the authority of the husband over his wife. Like Grace Chatterton, Eve's musicianship is directed towards the internal world of a current and future family. Yet in his last novel, Cooper would redirect this idea of the musical, performing woman into something dangerous and untrustworthy. In 1850, two years after the first Convention of Woman's Rights at Seneca Falls, the educated heroine represented in Eve Effingham has the potential to threaten Cooper's vision of an idealised America. Eve is protected by a husband equal to her in class and understanding, but in *The Ways of the Hour*, Cooper questions the benefits of a European education for an American woman who has lost, and worse still, discarded such masculine influence. Coupled with a radical social climate, Cooper once more addresses whether or not America is a safe environment for his ideal of womanhood: "Your return to America has, I fear, been most inopportune. Among other innovations that are making on every side of us, even to the verge of the dissolution of civilized society, comes the liberty of woman" (318). In the aftermath of a call for the universal rights of women, the performing woman becomes a rhetorical function that has the potential to destroy the very fabric of good society.

*The Ways of the Hour* is about the trial of an innocent woman charged with theft, arson and double murder in the small New York town of Bilberry, Duke's County. The accused, Mary Monson, is unknown in the community and as a highly accomplished young lady educated in Europe, who speaks French to her Swiss maid, she is considered by the locals as guilty for her aristocratic ways as for any evidence linking her to the crime. She is "too much of a great lady to be seen at the grate" and makes no attempts to ingratiate herself to the common people of Bilberry (184), but

it is from this community that the court jury will be chosen and “publick opinion” is “so perverted as to cause the false to seem the true [...]” (*American Democrat* 205, 207). Consequently, Mary is a would-be martyr in Cooper’s critique of the American justice system and its reliance on the concept of a jury of peers.

Nevertheless, the novel also deals with Cooper’s antagonism towards a new federal law which gave wives independent control over their property and income.<sup>10</sup> Developing his concerns about the American application of democracy outlined in *The American Democrat*, in particular its focus on popular opinion—“we see in our won democracy this manifest disposition to defer to the wrong, in matters that are not properly subject to the common sentiment, in deference to the popular will of the hour [...]” (131)—Mary herself commits populist political “wrongs” in the form of the woman’s rights movement.

Music is important throughout *The Ways of the Hour* and without question it is Cooper’s most musical novel. Not only is Mary an accomplished musician, her music and her situation is linked to Cooper’s textual criticism of the demands of the uneducated masses upon elite society. As if to confirm this, Cooper often uses cheap metaphors to incorporate music into his text against the judiciary and the attitudes of the men who govern. For example:

It is wonderful what a disposition there is among men to run into octaves, in everything they do, forgetting that your true melody is to be found only in the simpler and more natural notes. There is a much of the *falsestto*, now-a-days, in philanthropy, as in music” (48).

Additionally, ticketing at the New York opera provides an opportunity for Thomas Dunscomb—Cooper’s moral spokesperson in the narrative—to challenge the growing popularity and democracy of city entertainments.

“Things are changed in Ameriky, Mr Dunscomb,” his assistant Squire Timms proclaims, and evoking the authority of standard law texts, he challenges the rights of the theatres to exclude citizens on the basis of ticket price (87). Timms argues that

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<sup>10</sup> The 1848 New York Married Women’s Property Act gave married women control over any property, personal or real, held at the time of marriage. Any rents and profits from those properties would no longer be subject to the disposal of her husband and be under her sole control. Furthermore, married women in possession of such rent issues and profits were not liable for any debts belonging to their husband. This law became the model used by other states throughout the 1850s. (“Married Women’s Property Laws”).

the theatres are public space, so therefore should be open to all.<sup>11</sup> Dunscomb's retaliating argument implies that public space should respect the needs of class and that neither the opera nor the government should be obliged to subsidise those who cannot afford the ticket price in some misguided hope "to keep the people quiet, and possibly to help civilize them" (88).

The very circumstance that the audience pay for their seats, makes it, in law as in fact, a matter of covenant. As for this new-fangled absurdity about its being a duty to furnish low-priced seats for the poor, where they may sit and look at pretty women because they cannot see them elsewhere, it is scarcely worth an argument. If the rich should demand that the wives and daughters of the poor should be paraded in the pits and galleries, for *their* patrician eyes to feast on, a pretty clamour there would be! If the state requires cheap theatres, and cheap women, let the state pay for them. (87)

Cooper not only makes this an issue of the liberty of private enterprise, but remains steadfast to his attitude in *Home as Found* that the majority of people in the United States are incapable of really appreciating art. Nevertheless, Dunscomb's accusation of the poor attending the opera just to see the "pretty women" in the stalls and boxes is part of his wider argument that democratic principles are subjecting women to unsavoury society, thereby undermining social hierarchy. Cooper's reaction to what Gilbert and Gubar call the "woman problem," the "shredding fabric of patriarchal authority" (1: 21), was an assertion that women, in particular a woman like Mary Monson, need to be protected from the political movements of the day.

While awaiting trial in Bilberry, Mary's solace is her music, and she is allowed to have both her harp and piano with her in prison. She performs her music privately and without show, and this further assures the Bilberry locals of her foreignness, becoming part of the evidence used against her in the trial. "Neither you, nor your wives and daughters," the prosecuting District Attorney tells the jury, "speak in foreign tongues, or play on foreign instruments of music. We have been brought up in a republican simplicity" (239). There is no question in the narrative of

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<sup>11</sup> In regard to the unprecedented public response to performers like the singer Jenny Lind, William Weber writes:

The expansion of domestic music on such a vast scale by the 1840s created a public even including well-off artisans that made itself known most powerfully within the concert hall. What emerged was not a militant middle class public but rather an occasional episode, a cultural phenomenon, where the diverse new audience gave voice. That so powerful a manifestation of public passion took place in concerts showed that the old order of musical life was over. (20-21)

Mary's cultural superiority, but the heavy irony of these words is confirmed by an earlier claim from Mrs. Gott that "Bilberry has a great many musical ladies" and that a "good many judges say that Duke's county is not much behind the Island of Manhattan with the piano in particular" (99-100). Clearly protesting too much, Mrs. Gott's assertion of Bilberry's musical talent implies that Mary's private musicianship is in direct contrast to the competitive self-display expected by local standards of feminine accomplishments. A social contrast that is almost enough to hang her.

The great mystery of the plot is less the solving of the crime, but rather the true identity of Mary. Her attorney Dunscomb and his family are increasingly convinced of her cunning and management, yet despite insufficient evidence to convict her and the skilled counsel of Dunscomb, it seems she will be found guilty and sentenced to death, because she refuses to divulge information pertaining to herself and her fortune. When all hope of her release is lost, one of the supposedly murdered individuals reappears, the arson and murder turn out to be entirely accidental, a local woman is found guilty of theft but is not prosecuted, and the case is quickly concluded as a mockery of justice.

As the trial adjourns, Mary is revealed as Madame de Larocheforte, née Mildred Millington, orphan of American parents and the estranged wife of a French nobleman, who has left her fortune-hunting husband and is exerting rights over her property and income. A privilege granted to her by the law and the ways of the hour. The innocent victim of reverse snobbery is thus transformed into a woman who has no intention of adhering to the so-called "laws of nature" (130).

Cooper's theoretical discussion of women's exclusion from suffrage was fleeting in *The American Democrat*, and little more than justification that "[t]here is no more a literal universal suffrage, than a literal equality" (192). Furthermore, women's role in marriage was the divinely ordained and therefore unquestionable:

It is apparent throughout the code of christian morals, that a perfect reciprocity between the duties of social station is nowhere inferred. "Nevertheless," says St. Paul, "let every one of you in particular so love his wife, even as himself; and the wife *see* that she *reverence* her husband." There is an obligation of deference imposed on the wife, that is not imposed on the husband. (*American Democrat* 144)

Unable to fathom how a true lady of wealth and accomplishment could succumb to the philosophy of woman's rights, the long-suspecting Dunscomb diagnoses the



newly unmasked Mildred as insane.

Three days later Mildred Millington was in a state that left no doubts of her infirmity. The lucid intervals were long, however, and at such times her mind seemed clear enough on all subjects but one. Divorce was her "ruling" passion. (319-20)

The reason for her insanity is simple: her widower father's untimely death meant that Mary was largely influenced by friends in Paris, and although she has had the benefit of a liberal, European education, taught by "the very best masters" (158), unlike Eve Effingham before her, this was not sanctioned by a watchful father, reiterating the anxiety Wallace shows present in *Precaution* about "the apparent threat to traditional social institutions represented by the erosion of parental authority" (72). Consequently, Mary has in Dunscomb's eyes abandoned herself to malignant forces, and is an unhappy spirit in the body of womanly loveliness (319). She can never be the heroine of this narrative and that honour is given to Anna Updyke, as perfectly accepting and benign a young lady as Cooper's first heroine, Emily Moseley.

Anna is Cooper's didacticism made flesh: a proper lady who is spokeswoman for the gracious acceptance of the superiority of man. Mary on the other hand, continues to believe that "[m]en have not dealt fairly by women" and eloquently reacts against the societal belief that "if a woman thinks differently from those around her, she is expected to conceal her opinions, in order to receive those of her masters" (198). A sort of unwitting and unsympathetic premonition of the fate of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's narrator in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1890), Cooper's punishment for Mary's crime of being "seduced by notions seemingly so attractive" and actively seeking the "emancipation of her sex" is insanity and a confined existence (198).

The novel's double purpose of attacking the American jury system and the emerging woman's rights movement with Mary Monson as both the representative of the educated elite and the new woman so vehemently opposed by the author, could have made for a fascinating work on the complexities of society and social mores. H. Michael Buck's description of Scott's *Saint Ronan's Well* can be easily applied to *The Ways of the Hour*: "a novel in which a young aristocratic woman's mental health is victimized both by her own undisciplined behavior and by the rampant ambition of

a band of scheming, shallow-minded bourgeois" (193). That young woman is Clara Mowbray who "cares about no rules [society] can make" (*Saint Ronan's* 66), and whose lack of moral guidance in her youth leads her to become the victim of sexual impropriety and a sham marriage, and in turn, insanity and death.

Set in an early-nineteenth-century spa town in the Scottish Borders—a sort of provincial Bath, but one with only short-term popularity that quickly reverts to its "primitive obscurity" when the tourists and amusements move out (372)—*Saint Ronan's Well* is the most Austenian of Scott's novels, and addresses the madness created in society by sudden wealth and popularity. Cooper's novel engages with what seems to be a similar antipathy as Scott towards "the despotism of a popular government" (*Letters* 8: 96-97), arguing from the American perspective that "the 'music of the spheres' is a popular song" which subverts the natural order of society in favour of the "new dogma" of universal democracy (*Ways of the Hour* 198).

The synopsis of *Saint Ronan's Well* in Mark A. Weinstein's recent edition offers a description of Scott's themes that is decidedly less absolutist than Cooper's political message: *Saint Ronan's Well* is "no tale of antique virtue giving way to decadent ostentation. [...] everyone in the book has feet of clay."<sup>12</sup> Mary's tragedy is similar to Clara Mowbray's, whose "madness and eventual death are a result of the shallow, 'rootless' society to which she is forced to respond" (Buck 184), however, no one in Scott's society is free from moral censure.

Cooper's overt moral certainty means that even Mary's "sins" of an ill-matched marriage and separation barely resonate with the sexual impropriety and overt psychological instability of Clara.<sup>13</sup> Dunscomb, Cooper's moral representative, is the only one who can truly recognise Mary's unsettled mind and to the eyes of general society, she remains to the end a refined, beautiful and coherent lady. Cooper's narrative fails because the wholly unsatisfactory ending too easily relieves him from the difficult task of having to write a heroine who does not fulfil all his

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<sup>12</sup> This quote is taken from the dust jacket blurb, so is difficult to attribute officially to Weinstein.

<sup>13</sup> In the recent Edinburgh edition of *Saint Ronan's Well*, Weinstein restores from Scott's manuscript the original version of Hannah Irvin's confession to Josiah Cargill (see Weinstein's "Essay on the Text" (390, 403) for a detailed history of these editorial changes). The manuscript clearly reveals that Clara and Francis Tyrrel had sexual intercourse seven years before the novel begins: "She had indeed fallen, but Bulmer was not her seducer" (363). Hannah continues: "yet, so innocent were the lovers, that despite of the various arts which I used to entrap them, they remained guiltless until the fatal evening when Tyrrel met Clara for the last time ere he removed from the neighbourhood—and then the devil and Hannah Irwin triumphed." (363-64).

ideals. Mary's eloquent explanation of her political philosophy is undermined by the revelation of insanity. As with Katie Trumpener's analysis of Meg Merrilies in *Guy Mannering*, Cooper's narrative deployment of a mentally unsound spokesperson to counteract the women's rights movement "ultimately evacuates the force of her message, to protect characters, readers, and the narrative consciousness from its political implications" (Trumpener 222).<sup>14</sup>

However, that Cooper's only real female protagonist is also highly musical and that she is deemed insane by the end of the novel has to be significant. Music is a measure for social status and a tool for the application of moral and domestic femininity, but it also has the power to heighten the senses and emotional expression. Mary's performance practice is a symbol for political attitudes that have threatened Cooper's vision of genteel society. Evoking the commonly-held Victorian fear that music was a potentially dangerous influence on the minds of women, Cooper's subtext is equally clear: music can open the mind to those malignant forces.

In the figure of Mary Monson, Cooper establishes a character who should be one of the elite women of American society that require this masculine protection. She is outwardly a model of Cooper's ideal American girl, who according to Mary Suzanne Schriber "would combine freshness, simplicity and innocence that are unmistakably American with the polish and manner of Europe, thereby guaranteeing to American society the needed moral influence of woman's nature" (238). Mary is committing no crime in Cooper's order of class and gender by maintaining the rights of a private lady while awaiting trial. Indeed, the disapproval of the people of Bilberry is further evidence that the democratic masses will always find "fault with melody and a liberal spirit" (100). Dunscomb himself demands to know, "[w]ould they deprive her of a consolation as innocent as that she obtains from her harp and her piano, in addition to her other sufferings!" (100)

Such a spirit of music and womanhood is found in Washington Irving's story "The Wife" from *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1820). The young wife of a man recently bankrupt reveals the "boundless treasures of excellence" of a good wife—"love, and tenderness, and comfort" (31)—when she joyfully accepts her

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<sup>14</sup> Trumpener defines Meg as the novel's "[link] between displaced Gypsies in Scotland and displaced natives in India, who sets into motion the novel's passage from Scotland to India, and who raises the political questions that haunt the rest of the novel" (222).

new life in a simple cottage far from the fashionable world of her youth. Although their “splendid furniture” is sold, the “doting husband” full of “romantic gallantry” makes sure she keeps her harp (30).

That, he said, was too closely associated with the idea of herself; it belonged to the little story of their loves; for some of the sweetest moments of their courtship were those when he leaned over that instrument, and listened to the melting tones of her voice. (30)

But, music in the hands and mind of the unstable Mary is clearly not so innocent a diversion.

Yet Cooper’s narrative (almost frustratingly so) never condemns feminine music in sexual terms. He does not even represent the common eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fear that the performing woman threatened her role in society because she “became *visually* prominent” (Leppert, *Music* 40). Mary does not seduce with music; she renounces. Nevertheless, it allows Mary to further express her individualist subjectivity and for this she is punished. Eve Effingham’s musicianship has its locus in her role as a daughter, satisfying “familial and social demands” through the promotion of family and domestic felicitousness (Solie 86). Mary is not condemned for openly expressing her sexuality through musical performance, rather the reverse. She “performs” her womanhood using the convention of domestic music, but refuses to fulfil her gendered and social role as a wife, the only expression of sexuality permitted in Cooper’s ideology.

Specific to Cooper’s novel is the cultural association of the harp through the literature of both Austen and Scott, and its role as a potential indicator for Mary’s wilful independence. The harp belongs to the domain of the genteel European lady and picturesque romanticism, but also the “wild wailings” of Celtic music (Scott, “Glenfinlas” 1.95). Mary’s harp is unique and foreign to the people of Bilberry, and the repeated religious imagery of King David and his harp serves as a moral imperative to Mary’s innocence. Dunscomb even uses this ideology to appeal to the people of Bilberry.

“The harp is a most religious instrument,” he coolly observed, “and it has no relation to the violin, or any light and frivolous piece of music. David used it as the instrument of praise, and why should not a person who stands charged——” (186)

Nevertheless, the references to the psalmist and the absurd claims about the harp’s

biblical antiquity (101, 158), say more about the Bilberry locals and Cooper's assertion of their misguided faith in the superiority of American education (202), than Mary's musicianship. Furthermore, its foreignness negates any sympathy on the part of the prosecution because any instrument of the "old countries" implies "deviltries of the same nature" (202). This alerts the reader to the possibility that Mary's music may not be that of psalms and songs of praise, but rather, the literary antecedence of Mary Crawford and Flora Mac-Ivor.

The harp in Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) is anything but an innocent instrument. Mary Crawford is a worldly, manipulative character, and her musical accomplishment is a prop in her attempts to win the favour and hand of Edmund Bertram—"she regards her own harp-playing as an important weapon in her sexual armoury" (Piggott 75). Piggott further elucidates the domestic harp's reputation as a more sexualised instrument than the domestic pianoforte.

The value of the harp as a domestic instrument, and its superiority to the pianoforte for the display of feminine charms (more particularly of feminine arms) had been recognised from quite early in the eighteenth century. (38)

Feminine music's close alignment with sanctioned flirtation and the marriage market meant that sexuality was always a barely submerged quantity in even the most benign domestic performance. In *The Ways of the Hour*, Cooper may rely on a perceived understanding of the harp as an instrument complicit with sexual intent, but Mary Monson is more unsexed than in danger of sexual impropriety.

Mary Crawford's harp represents more, betraying also her indifference to the needs of the surrounding community and her "selfish individualism" (Trumpener 19). Mary is astonished that during a late harvest, no cart will be made available for the transportation of her instrument, and that her "true London maxim, that every thing is to be got with money" does not hold true in the country (47). The double purpose of Cooper's political message means that Mary Monson's tragic flaw of individualism is almost a virtue in reaction to the provincialism of Bilberry, but as discussed above, her reclusive musicianship is contrary to the gender expectations of the novel. Performance practice is here a symbol for Mary's attitudes towards marriage and family. Mary plays for herself and her solitude, and contrary to the moral order established by Cooper, "she stands in her own light" (158). Despite the



significance of Mary Crawford's harp in the wider literary understanding of the instrument, and the implication that the female musician is a potentially dangerous entity, the origins of the mad harpist in Cooper's novels lie clearly in the world of Sir Walter Scott.<sup>15</sup>

Having established the precedence of the "mad" musician through Scott's writing and *Precaution*'s Francis Denbigh, the relationship in Cooper between the mind and music is a potent narrative feature. It is difficult to align Mary Monson with a character like Meg Merrilies, but she bears important similarities in class and intellect to Norna of Fiftful-Head in Scott's *The Pirate*.<sup>16</sup> The singer of haunting songs, Norna is described "as a woman of very extraordinary abilities, which are very often reconciled with a strong cast of insanity" (*The Pirate* 189). Furthermore, in Flora Mac-Ivor, Scott created a character keenly aware of the seductive force of music, and "like every beautiful woman, was conscious of her own power" (106).

Upon her "trembling structure" of Jacobitism, she plays upon her harp and sings heroic ballads of ancient Highland Battles to the naïve and receptive Edward Waverley (105). Her song is a far cry from the domestic performance given for Edward by Rose Bradwardine in the company of her father and friends (58-60). Instead of the "wild and appropriate accompaniments" of Flora's constructed Highland scene, Rose plays (appropriate to her sex and station) in private apartments and accompanies herself simply on the harpsichord.

The harp is associated not only with a poetic nationalism, but also a failed political ideal. Despite her adherence to filial duty, like Mary, Flora suffers for her politics and independent strength. She never descends into the madness of Clara

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<sup>15</sup> Trumpener locates in Mary Crawford's harp the cultural associations of contemporary novels such as Sydney Owenson's *Wild Irish Girl* (1806) and Scott's *Waverley* (1814) and their "harp-playing heroines." Mary Crawford counteracts the "picturesque and romantic charm" of Flora Mac-Ivor, because she does not signify "a poetic soul and reverence for national traditions" (18-19). Neither does Mary Monson, but nationalism is a difficult entity in *The Ways of the Hour* because it reveals the cross-purposes in Cooper's narrative. Mary is not the virtuous heroine developed in Anna Updyke and this characterisation is marked by her European manners: "It was true that her courtesy was more elaborate and European, if one may use the expression, than it is usual to see in an American female, and her air was less ardent than that of Anna" (166). However, Mary's education and reticence towards the local customs and expectations of the people of Bilberry initially set her apart as this is less significant with the cultural and literary associations of the harp.

<sup>16</sup> Cooper wrote in the 1849 Introduction to *The Pilot* that the novel was a response to the less than realistic "seamanship" in Scott's *The Pirate* ("The Pilot" 5). Wallace writes that Cooper "took what he found valuable in Scott's *The Pirate*, corrected what displeased him, merged it with the Byronic hero, American history, and his own experience, and invented the sea novel [...]" (172).

Mowbray, but her unsettled mind is assured: "[...] there is a busy devil at my heart, that whispers—but it were madness to listen to it—that the strength of mind on which Flora prided herself has—murdered her brother!" (322) Flora retreats to the Scottish Benedictine nuns in Paris and Cooper takes a similar, but Protestant narrative conclusion to Scott by leaving Mary reading the New Testament and learning humility and womanly duty from Anna Updyke (331). But it is clear that she will never escape those malignant forces which have seduced her into the philosophy of women's emancipation.

Like Eve and Grace, the mode of Mary's domestic music is essentially conventional and beyond reproach. This is not a matter of appropriate repertoire or instrumentation, but rather the intent of performance. Grace's brief moment of self-expression transforms in the face of the woman's rights movement into Mary's lack of moral rectitude made manifest in independence. In fact, she never saw marriage as an event that would change her circumstances, and consequently, her performance is one of the wilful, perpetual maiden and not the married woman. On becoming Madame de Larocheville, Mildred Millington did not leave aside her accomplishments to reflect on her responsibilities as a wife. Worse still, her imprisonment in Bilberry is actually cause for celebration—the world and its demands left her alone. With her piano and harp she has no need of outside society.

[...] but how cleverly I contrived to escape them all!...oh! the excitement of the last two months has been a gift of paradise to me, and, for the first time since my marriage, have I known what true happiness was! (319)

*The Ways of the Hour* does not condemn Mary for her need to be private; it condemns her understanding of privacy that is contrary to the patriarchal family unit. Her musical renunciation is ultimately damning because she uses it to assert her hopes for social and financial independence. Mary does not fulfil Cooper's expectations of the social contract of genteel feminine performance. She is only womanly and fascinating "*when she chooses to be*" (224) (my own italics). At the end of the novel, modern readers are typically frustrated by Mary's punishment and it seems Cooper has created for himself the "slavery of American womanhood" he so feared for Eve Effingham.

Music is a brief, but potent signifier for Cooper's sense of the private family

thwarted by the popular politics of democratic entitlement. Nevertheless, his critique of the woman's rights movement provides an essential introduction to the continued discussion of music as a complicated symbol for women's autonomy in nineteenth-century American society. Cooper's ideal of feminine musicianship seems unattainable in his depiction of life in the United States. Eve Effingham's piano is left in the liminal space of the mid-Atlantic and Mary Monson's can only be played in the confinement of prison and mental instability. Grace Chatterton does not even play her piano in the first place. His representation of American society is at odds with his genteel elitism, but one might argue that by the 1850s it is Cooper's ideal lady who is in fact ill-equipped to engage with music in America, even within the empire of the lady's drawing-room.

As Elizabeth Oakes Smith said of the woman of character who is expected to conform to society's role: "They are created not to enjoy but to suffer" (199). In the performance of American womanhood, it is Cooper's inflexibility in dictating what womanhood ought to be, and not necessarily the "desert air" of American culture, that hinders women's music. However, Cooper was not alone in his concerns about how to transplant the best of European culture into this developing society. Music, particularly German symphonic and Italian opera, was seen as the pinnacle of western civilisation and cultural development, and throughout the middle years of the nineteenth century, educated Americans were anxious to establish such music as a vibrant part of their society. They saw art music and the establishment of theatres and opera houses as the great civiliser and educator of the nation—a nation that for the better part only sang folk music, hymns and parlour songs around a domestic piano.

In House's analysis of Cooper's representation of women's role in American society, she briefly notes that this idea of culture and civilisation soon came to mean "domestication" or "the house-breaking of boys like puppies," for instance, Huck Finn's fear of "being 'sivilized' by Aunt Sally" (House & Belfiglio 54). Mark Twain satirises so-called civilised music in *Huckleberry Finn* with the Grangerford girls displaying their accomplishments by hammering out popular pieces on an old "tin-pan" piano (163). This was not music, but the badly-executed expression of an idea of culture. As upwardly mobile Americans bought pianos in ever-increasing numbers, it was not just a matter of New York Hajjis emulating European social

practices, but that the piano was becoming a commodity in the expansion of the nation and the “civilising” of the west.

Cooper is just one part of a significant literary voice that questions the blind application of European practices in American society. “Taste,” he wrote in *Home as Found*, “whether in the arts, literature, or anything else, is a natural impulse, like love” (79), but in his fictional world of mid-century New York City, taste has been reduced to the purchase and misuse of cultural objects, and he sees little but failure in America’s attempts to democratise elite culture. Although he would have cast her as the very worst of those women who were calling for radical changes to woman’s role in society, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Margaret Fuller also saw a “slavery” of womanhood in the misapplied feminine accomplishment of music. For her, the piano as a commodity of the domestic space stifled music’s potential to be a Romantic force for equality and subjective expression, and in her observations of feminine accomplishments in the west, she articulated from a very different perspective the social issue Cooper’s novels reveals—the recognition that music was being lost in the transportation of the piano across the Atlantic.





## Chapter 2

### Margaret Fuller and Music on the Lakes (in 1843)

[...] and I think I hear  
The sound of that advancing multitude  
Which soon shall fill these deserts. From the ground  
Comes up the laugh of children, the soft voice  
Of maidens, and the sweet and solemn hymn  
Of Sabbath worshippers. [...]

William Cullen Bryant  
*The Prairies* (1834): ll.115-120

Music be thy sails unfurled,  
Bear me to thy better world.

Margaret Fuller  
*Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* (149)

“As to music,” wrote Margaret Fuller in *Summer on the Lakes, in 1843*, of her travels through the settlements of Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory, “I wish I could see in such places the guitar rather than the piano, and good vocal more than instrumental music” (40). Eighteen months after Charles Dickens was impressed by the provision of “a joint-stock piano in a great many of the boarding-houses” (78) for the mill girls of Lowell, Massachusetts, Fuller observed that the piano and the culture of feminine accomplishments was perhaps unnecessary in the isolated settlements of the prairies.

The piano many carry with them, because it is the fashionable instrument in the eastern cities. Even there, it is so merely from the habit of imitating Europe, for not one in a thousand is willing to give the labor requisite to ensure any valuable use of the instrument.

But, out here, where the ladies have so much less leisure, it is still less desirable. Add to this, they never know how to tune their own instruments, and as persons seldom visit them who can do so, these pianos are constantly out of tune, and would spoil the ear of one who began by having any.

The guitar, or some portable instrument which requires less practice, and could be kept in tune by themselves, would be far more desirable for most of these ladies. It would give all they want as a household companion to fill up the gaps of life with a pleasant stimulus or solace, and be sufficient accompaniment to the voice in social meetings. (40)

Like Dickens, Fuller is vague about the numbers of pianos she encountered, but she is prepared to comment on the instrument beyond Dickens’s remark that “the

pianos, and the circulating libraries, and even the Lowell Offering, startle us by their novelty, and not by their bearing upon any abstract question of right or wrong" (79). Without wishing to contribute to the critical school of thought that *Summer on the Lakes* was "intended as a corrective to Dickens's *American Notes*" (Chevigny 316), I wish to show that Fuller's little-known observation about pianos in the prairie settlements actively confronts questions about the role of music in women's lives, and, in accordance with her feminist and music writings, attempts to redefine domestic music for a new environment. Rather than a dichotomy in her musical theory, that has one set of rules for the "untutored genius" of the settlements and another for the "cultivated genius" of the Boston Concert Hall, I propose that her enthusiasm for music to reflect environment is an assertion of Romantic principles of art as self, re-envisioned through the quotidian demands of life on the Illinois prairie.

Fuller's journey to the west came at time marked by personal financial problems and professional uncertainties. Needing rest from her work in Boston and having hoped to travel in Europe, she instead travelled to Illinois with her friends, brother and sister, James Freeman Clarke and Sarah Ann Clarke (*Summer* viii). Leaving her essay "The Great Lawsuit" behind in Boston for publication in *The Dial*, her trip was a therapeutic departure from intellectual life and she describes *The Summer on the Lakes*, a collection of sketches, stories, meditations, and social commentaries inspired by her travels, as "the poetic impression of the country at large" (42).<sup>1</sup>

A concern that permeates Fuller's generally enthusiastic response to the western settlements is her observation that "[t]he great drawback upon the lives of the settlers, at present is the unfitness of the women for their new lot" (38). She saw "the very Eden which earth might still afford to a pair willing to give up the hackneyed pleasures of the world," but this opportunity for a new "more intimate communion with one another and with beauty" was being stifled by the settlers' desire to replicate eastern life in the west (75-76). Although Fuller delighted in seeing a "Provence rose, then in blossom," a symbol of the settlers' "old home loves,

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<sup>1</sup> See Susan Belasco Smith's Introduction to *The Summer on the Lakes, in 1843* for a detailed discussion of the difficulty in categorising the work and the critical convention of "editing out what are perceived as the digressions to focus on single sections of the book" (xiii). Generally viewed as travelogue, Smith argues that, "Fuller herself attempts to advise the reader on the miscellaneous character of her book at the beginning of chapter 1 [...]" (xii).

brought into connection with their new splendours" (25), she believed that the piano signified women's need to "struggle under every disadvantage to keep up the necessary routine of small arrangements," thus rendering them ill-suited to settler life (39). Moreover, Fuller soon discovered "how that Eden might at once exist and yet be unavailable to women" (Kolodny 113).

For Fuller, the great proponent of Beethoven and German Romanticism, the social function of the domestic and feminine piano undermined music, which she believed was the "poetical side of existence" ("Entertainments" 46), and had the promise of uniting people with hope for the future. "We look upon music as the great modern teacher of the world," she wrote in an 1846 review for the *New-York Tribune*, "the universal language which should bring nations and men together in the noblest and best way" ("Francisco"). At the same time as Catharine Beecher promoted women as the ideal teachers of the west and moral educators of the ever-expanding nation, Fuller wanted to see the instruction of children that would "enable them to profit by the great natural advantages of their position" (39).

The impracticability of the piano is a concern shared by other women writers of the period, such as Susanna Moodie and Caroline M. Kirkland (whom Fuller read in preparation for her journey (Kolodny 131)). But while Kirkland saw a society into which only a few women could successfully bring their pianos, Fuller realised that through "that little world the piano" ("Entertainments" 58), the universal language of music as Romantic self-expression was denied women, the very people it was intended to serve. Her hopes for the west as an extension of that "less encumbered field, and freer air" she wrote of in "The Great Lawsuit" were checked by her understanding of the piano as indicative of a society in which "no women have had a fair chance" (38, 7).

There is something rather romantic about the image of a piano transported to the backwaters of civilisation. Impossibly tied to the back of a wagon or a boat, and dragged against all sense and reason across the prairie, through the bush, or into the jungle to bring music and, most importantly, a sense of home to a new land. It was a practice certainly not unique to the American west, as confirmed in Janet Frame's

*The Carpathians* (1988) by one character's nostalgic description of colonial New Zealand:

Oh, we used to be a great piano country! The early settlers, the families hoping to find paradise with acres of land, a mansion, servants, leisure, all brought their pianos and sheet music. The early battles to get land at all costs were fought by furniture—pianos and writing desks—as well as by people. (111)

The piano signified femininity and civilisation in a male dominated environment and the critic Mary Paul observes that in literature and cultural memory alike, “the absurdity and difficulty of bringing an object as unwieldy as a piano to unknown and inaccessible areas intensified the powerfulness of the image” (78). It represents an overwhelming desire for an object of taste and an instrument of culture without practical considerations for how and why in that particular space. We are reminded of Wallace Steven’s “Anecdote of the Jar,” where a jar placed in Tennessee “made the slovenly wilderness/Surround that hill” (ll.3-4).

The juxtaposition of cultural object and wilderness is cinematic in its imagery and we only need think of the half boxed-up piano in the surf on Karekare beach in Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993)<sup>2</sup> or Nicole Kidman playing a piano on the back of a wagon as both instrument and young woman are transported to an isolated settlement in *Cold Mountain* (2003). The audience instantly recognises that the piano does not belong in these worlds, and by association, neither does the woman who plays it.<sup>3</sup> The piano signifies a society, a culture that is incompatible with the settler existence and superfluous to practical requirements. What artistic or what foolish

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<sup>2</sup> As a New Zealander, my research has been marked, somewhat frustratingly at times, by questions about Jane Campion’s *The Piano*. I have not discussed the film in depth in this thesis because it is largely irrelevant to the subject of my study, namely the piano in nineteenth-century American literature. Nevertheless, it does raise important questions about late-twentieth-century ideas about what the piano meant to the women who played them, and how feminist reworkings of the colonial subject can anachronistically undermine the actual stories of nineteenth-century colonial women. Most interesting is the contrast between Campion’s colonial piano and the representation of music and unrequited love in the colonial setting of Jane Mander’s *The Story of a New Zealand River* (1920). The controversial similarities between these two narratives are discussed in Mary Paul’s *Her Side of the Story: Readings of Mander, Mansfield, & Hyde* (Dunedin, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> The film *Cold Mountain* is adapted from Charles Frazier’s 1997 novel of the same name. In Frazier’s narrative the piano’s significance as an impractical object inconsistent with the hardships of life during Civil War is established with the introduction of the character Ada Munro: “It gave her pleasure to play on the piano, but not enough to compensate for her recent realization that she could not weed a row of young bean plants without pulling half of them out along with the ragweed” (23). Interestingly, in both *Cold Mountain* and *The Piano*, the piano-playing protagonists are called Ada (Ada McGrath in *The Piano*).

woman—it is nearly always a woman—would need a piano there? It is an extravagance, an artistic expression, a marker of her status as other.

However, it is our twenty-first-century eyes—informed by the sensibility expressed by Stevens that the jar “took dominion everywhere” and “[i]t did not give of bird or bush” (ll.9, 11)—that automatically make this assumption, and our interpretation does not necessarily hold true with nineteenth-century concerns about settlers and their pianos. We do not think a character in a contemporary narrative strange for packing her stereo into the back of a tiny car as she moves herself and her life across a country. Home music is not necessarily an extravagance to us, and nineteenth-century pianos should be viewed in a similar light. In 1843, many people in the western regions of North America may not have yet heard of pianos, but for unwilling and enthusiastic pioneers alike they may have been an impractical form of home music, but they represented a more certain sense of “home” left behind in the east and settlers’ intentions to define the culture of their new home under specific terms.

In this situation, the piano becomes the quintessential object of bourgeois cultural capital as established in Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction* (1979).<sup>4</sup> It represents a “legitimate culture” that can only be acquired by a removal from “economic necessities” and “practical urgencies” (*Distinction* 53-54). Families marked their success as settlers and the conquering of their new land with the purchase of a piano, “ordering them from the East,” as one historian tells us, in “letters filled with elaborate instructions as to size, make, and wood and shipping arrangements [...]” (Myres 178). This statement of socio-economic status was made all the more powerful if the family had never owned a piano before.<sup>5</sup> Like Miss “Teeny” Pye in Kirkland’s *Western Clearings* (1845) many people in the west really did own “something called a piano, which, though lacking several important strings, still was

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<sup>4</sup> Bourdieu explains that for culture to be effective and valued, cultural practices must be innate to society. He writes, “[b]ourgeois culture and the bourgeois relation to culture owe their inimitable character to the fact that, like popular religion as seen by Groethuyser, they are acquired pre-verbally, by early immersion in a world of cultivated people, practices and objects” (75).

<sup>5</sup> The piano became a powerful symbol of cultural identity for settlers to the west and the United States in general. Specifically discussing German, Polish and Italian immigrants, Parakilis writes: Many European immigrants to the New World came with musical traditions and abilities that had no connection to the piano; the piano represented their aspirations to be successful in their new land. But because it was itself part of European culture, the piano could also remind them of the land they left behind; and that identification with their past could in turn help them find their place in their new home. (228)



capable of an atrocious noise which passed with some for music" (135), and most were—as the author describes one village instrument, most probably her own—"that frail treasure" (162).

Arthur Loesser considers the 1880s and 1890s as the great period of piano expansion across the United States. In the last decade of the nineteenth century he claims that the rate of piano increase was 5.6 times that of the population (549), and although the piano had been a feature of western life from the 1830s it was a rare one. Ruth Solie's research into the domestic piano shows that while the "cultural consolation of music" appears even in the unlikeliest circumstances, such as "the overland trail in covered wagons," young women "did not usually have their pianos with them" (99). Whatever the numbers of pianos west of the Alleghenies, there was definitely a public enthusiasm for music and music-teaching.

In particular, Cincinnati, Ohio was something of a musical centre for the ever expanding west. Loesser writes that in 1834, Mr. W. Nixon, who ran the city "Musical Seminary," had written and published a *Guide to Instruction on the Pianoforte*.

Books on music were not common anywhere in the United States, all the less so when arising from the banks of the Ohio. It "presupposes the existence of a demand for musical information, or an author would scarcely print," as the appreciative and astonished New York Reviewer said. (478)<sup>6</sup>

How Mr. Nixon and his wife got pianos for teaching across land or by steamer to their school, Loesser can only guess, but he does provide evidence from the 1822 manufacturing census that at least one small firm was, or at least had been, making pianos in the city (478).

In *A New Home-Who'll Follow?* (1839), *A Forest Life* (1842) and *Western Clearings* (1845), writings Annette Kolodny describes as an "Emigrants' Guide to a Failed Eden" (131), Caroline Kirkland portrays a society full of male fiddlers, dancing and singing schools, all intended to alleviate the hard work of frontier

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<sup>6</sup> Loesser also quotes an article from *New York Music Review* (April 29, 1839) about the Cincinnati Musical Seminary. The reviewer "found it remarkable that the 'West' had a whole music *school* that also *taught 'theory'!*" In regard to this musical community, Loesser suggests that the intensity of Fanny Trollope's revulsion of Cincinnati in the late 1820s "may have allowed a few things to escape her" (478).

existence.<sup>7</sup> Pianos are few and far between, but when they do enter her reminiscences they act as an excellent guide to Fuller's concerns about music in the west.

Kirkland's stories about the fictional settlement of Montacute, Michigan in the late 1830s and early 1840s were predominantly autobiographical sketches of Pinckney, a village established by her husband William in 1837. Her pianos tend to reflect the education and status, or lack thereof, of her neighbours, but as markers of status, Kirkland was conscious of the potential absurdity of the piano in the frontier environment.

I feel no ambition to aid in the formation of a Montacute aristocracy, for which an ample field is now open, and all the proper materials are at hand. What lack we? Several of us have as many as three cows; some few, carpets and shanty-kitchens; and one or two, piano-fortes and silver tea-sets. (*New Home* 313)

In the great push towards replicating eastern and European life in the wilderness, the impracticality of the piano was its biggest downfall. Just as "[p]arlors, and libraries, and halls, and verandahs, require to be swept and dusted," pianos need to be tuned (*Forest Life* 2: 55).

Pianos were indeed frail wooden instruments subject to the ravages of temperature change and humidity, not to mention the internal pressure of a few tonnes of string tension. Some European piano makers had started experimenting with metal bracing for the sounding board in the 1820s, motivated in part by the desire to increase dynamic capability with the introduction of thicker strings and greater tension, but the greater concern for Americans was the warping of the instrument's parts caused by their country's extremes in weather (Loesser 463).<sup>8</sup> In 1825, an American craftsman called Alpheus Babcock patented a complete iron frame for square pianos, as a measure to strengthen and stabilise the instruments. Square pianos were the mainstay of the domestic market in the United States, but such industrial measures as the use of iron came slowly to piano production. Jonas Chickering, the great Boston piano maker, had introduced Babcock's frames to his

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<sup>7</sup> The singing school was a popular institution in North America from the early eighteenth century to its eventual decline in the nineteenth century. Generally taught by itinerant singing masters, the schools would offer brief courses in note-reading and part-singing. For contemporary accounts of the schools see Tawa, *High-Minded and Low-Down* (92-99).

<sup>8</sup> See Parakilas for a more detailed discussion of early innovations in the production of the iron frame (48-51).

square pianos in 1837 (Parakilis 50), but Americans did not all buy Chickering and one-piece metal frames would not be a standard feature for a few decades to come.

Like the harpsichord before them, early-nineteenth-century pianos would have required weekly, if not daily tunings, in addition to regular string replacement and general repair. In fact, the professional piano tuner did not exist until well into the 1840s (Parakilas 158), and the onus of running maintenance would have rested on the pianist. Given the literary evidence, it can be presumed that most young lady pianists did not bother to learn the difficult art of piano tuning and their instruments were left to deteriorate to an unplayable condition. Kirkland notes in *A Forest Life* (1842), when discussing the piano of an English immigrant to Montacute, that “Florella has fortunately been taught to tune, as every lady should be who brings an instrument into the wilds” (2:122).

The unreliable state of small town pianos and the poor standard of some rural singing schools are discussed by Susanna Moodie in *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (1853). In a tale of the “Trials of a Travelling Musician,” one Mr. H\_\_\_\_ on tour in 1848 in the United States, Moodie gives a rather disparaging account of the musical abilities and expectations of the average American (deftly avoiding criticism of her fellow Canadians). In a village in the western states the comical and incompetent singing master of the school considers the piano borrowed for the concert, complete with rusty strings and loose keys, perfectly tolerable, despite Mr. H’s protests.

I had been obliged to postpone my own concert until the next evening, for I found the borrowed piano such a poor one, and so miserably out of tune, that it took me several hours rendering it at all fit for service.  
(126)

Moodie finds the singing master’s justification that “there’s nobody here that ever he’rd a better” indicative of the general state of music in isolated regions (118), but the problem of tuning and maintenance did make the piano an impractical option for the untrained musician and raises a similar concern to Fuller: If you can’t “sing well to a bad piano” (Moodie 118), then maybe you should dispense with the piano.

It is the juxtaposition of technical skill and cultural appropriateness that is at the heart of Kirkland’s criticisms of pianos and piano girls. Her attitudes towards them are tinged with a hope for that “curious mixture of good-breeding with that sort

of rustic freedom and abruptness,” she believes “is the natural growth of the wilderness” (*New Home* 254-55), but they are nonetheless typical of contemporary attitudes towards feminine music and accomplishments. While riding in the woods one day with her husband, Kirkland’s autobiographical narrator, Mrs. Mary Clavers, meets a young school friend from New York living in a secluded cottage far from the nearest settlement. Despite Cora Hastings’s distance from metropolitan society, the cottage is described as “a young lady’s dream,” made complete with the presence of a piano:

We found the house quite capacious and well-divided, and furnished as neatly though far less ostentatiously than a cottage *ornée* in the vicinity of some great metropolis. There was a great chintz-covered sofa—a very jewel for your siesta—and some well-placed lounges; and in an embayed window draperied with wild vines, a reading-chair of the most luxurious proportions, with its foot-cushion and its prolonged rockers. Neat, compact presses, filled with books, new as well as old, and a cabinet piano-forte, made up nearly all the plenishin’, but there was enough. (*New Home* 255-56)

Miss Teeny Pye and her managing aunt are censured with much amusement for their failed attempts to attract a local boy with both parlour songs and public fainting—Teeny “had seen a belle faint in public at ‘the East’” (*Western Clearings* 137)—but the potential manipulation of feminine accomplishments is not similarly applied to Kirkland’s other piano-playing characters. Cora may have once fallen “shockingly in love” and another musical woman’s circumstances reveal what the gossips call “a priory ‘tachment’” (*New Home* 258, 243), which suggests a link between romantic and musical passion, but they never transgress beyond redemption and are now living in the bonds of a sanctioned marriage. They play their “brilliant waltzes for the children (240) and domestic felicitousness, and are persons of “taste in pictures, in music, in books, in flowers” (238). Kirkland celebrated those like Mrs. Sibthorpe in *A Forest Life* whose “manners were those of refined and fashionable society; her sentiments fresh and artless enough for a Swiss mountain girl, or a native of our own bright West” (2: 48-49); a woman who wears “blue-stockings occasionally” but knows how to wear others (49).

Essentially, they are “ladies” who have accepted the hardships of frontier labour, but also recognise the “romance of rustic life” (*New Home* 151). They can recreate their home life back East with a cabinet piano in a forest cottage, while

wearing “rational-home-like calico” (256) and understanding the music that surrounds them in the surrounding wilderness, their “incipient Eden” (134). Most importantly, although Kirkland dismantles “exaggerated expectations and pastoral delusions” of frontier life (Kolodny 145), she never deconstructs the societal expectations of feminine leisure. Whereas this Eden was not available to Fuller’s western women, Kolodny observes that the women Kirkland idealises as those who could become a new Eve or “American Amaryllis” are the same women who “enjoyed the privileged leisure to explore the ancient woods [...] protected [...] from the fate of the toil-worn and housebound women who would elicit Margaret Fuller’s sympathy in Illinois and Wisconsin” (145-46). With obvious class, economic and education distinctions, these genteel women may keep their pianos.

Fuller did not visit a society in the earliest stages of settlement, but rather a region going through the “mushroom growth” of a materialist society she found distasteful (18). As Kolodny points out, “the comparative speed and relative comfort of the rail and steamboat systems offered Illinois and the Wisconsin Territory as easily accessible destinations”—far less intrepid than the “thousand emigrants in ox-drawn covered wagons” who began the “Great Emigration” to Oregon that same summer of 1843 (112). Even those settlers who chose the more isolated regions of the midwest began to feel the pressure of increased settlement. Indeed, in *Little House on the Prairie* (1935)—Laura Ingalls Wilder’s fictionalised account of her childhood in the west, set nearly forty years after Fuller’s travels—, it is the ever-increasing number of settlers to the Big Woods of Wisconsin that encourages Pa Ingalls to remove his family to the “apparent emptiness” of the Kansas Prairie (Susina 158). The path to their house had become a road on which “wagons slowly creaked by” and Laura often heard “the ringing thud of an axe which was not Pa’s axe, or the echo of a shot that did not come from his gun” (Wilder 1).

Fuller saw in this economic expansion the demise of the Native American people—whom she considered “the rightful lords of a beauty they forbore to deform” (29)—, the potential obliteration of the surrounding environment, and the continued subjugation of woman’s cultural expression. The promise of nature did not correlate with the expectations of a “city education” and the doctrine of separate spheres (39). Although the west held in Fuller’s ideals the potential to be that “less encumbered



field” where woman could “learn and manifest the capacities of her nature,” it was, in reality, an extension of the hardships she believed were faced by all womanhood: “If kept from excitement, she is not from drudgery (“Great Lawsuit” 38, 12). While the “wives of the poorer settlers, having more hard work to do than before, very frequently become slatterns,” the “refined neatness” expected by “the ladies” put them at a disadvantage (*Summer* 38-39).

In the little world of the piano, a world of parlours, feminine music, hopeful brides and the cult of domesticity, the “necessary routine of small arrangements” dominated family life (38-39). Nevertheless, the myth of the domestic and feminine piano that Solie illustrates is linked to the familial and social demands of girlhood, and is essential in the understanding of a community desperate to bring so-called civilisation to the west. The “mushroom growth” Fuller so deplored was in part motivated by the desire to replicate eastern society on the frontier. Amidst the fear in wider American society that the untamed living conditions of the western settlements might result in the “collapse of social stability and civilized values” (Jeffrey 22), it was the belief in women’s moral superiority that gave hope to the future of the developing nation.

In the rhetoric of the “Cult of True Womanhood,” the piano represented a tool for women’s emotional responsibilities to make home “a cheerful place, so that brothers, husbands and sons would not go elsewhere in search of a good time” (Welter 163), and the transportation of the piano could be rationalised as part of the domestic movement intended to morally strengthen the United States: “Women’s prescribed role as providers of musical—and other emotional—sustenance for family and community entailed as well their responsibility to teach the skill to the next generation” (Solie 100). Kirkland’s reasoning for why women were “the first to attempt the refining process,” was that they were also the first to “feel sensibly the deficiencies of the ‘savage’ state” (*New Home* 247), and Kolodny therefore determines that the cumulative effect of such ideologies “was to place the responsibility for creating a western Eden where sentiment and habit had traditionally located it—in women’s hands” (Kolodny 147).

Julie Roy Jeffrey writes that “the rhythms of frontier life suggested that the cult of domesticity was irrelevant to women’s real concerns” (20). The process of

settlement had no singular feminine response and it certainly tested nineteenth-century gender roles, but central to Jeffrey's analysis is the recognition that despite the physical tasks demanded of women by frontier life and the blurring of gender roles, women did "not abandon familiar notions of woman's place" (6). The eventual civilising of the frontier was the reward for their time of physical labour and shared work with men. Rather than the west undermining the doctrine of separate spheres, Jeffrey comes to the conclusion that in the great desire for progress, white female settlers saw themselves as the civilisers of the wilderness: "Their behavior and their attitude toward their family, their attempts to replicate eastern female culture, suggest that their new environment, although it changed what they did, had only a limited impact on their views" (80).

This was, of course, an issue very much in the public forum as the realities of settlers' labour threatened accepted cultural norms. One approach to the question of woman's place in the west was Catharine Beecher's campaign in *An Essay on the Education of Female Teachers* (1835) for women to teach the millions of children in the new settlements who were "without any means of instruction" (qtd. in Burstyn 394). Her writings on education and domestic economy were in part motivated by "the heroines of the west, who, with such unyielding fortitude and cheerful endurance, attempt similar duties amid so many disadvantages and deprivations" (*Treatise* 47). Beecher held women up as the moral force required to stabilise the domestic dilemma of rapid economic change, and that this endeavour should extend to the classroom, because "the education necessary to fit a woman to be a teacher, is exactly the one that best fits her for that domestic relation she is primarily designed to fill" (qtd. in Burstyn 396).

The fiction of an ideal domesticity demanded that refined neatness must not be degraded by any economic and social disadvantage. In *Little House on the Prairie*, Ma Ingalls's china figurine signifies the transplantation of civilisation, unbroken by the wilderness. Its placement on the mantel-shelf was the great symbolic act of creating home and society in their little log cabin on the Kansas prairie: "Ma set in the middle of the mantel-shelf the little china woman she had brought from the Big Woods. The little china woman had come all the way and had not been broken" (73). But when this parlour world of china figurines and pianos was

transported, many women struggled with mapping their domestic world onto the environment of the west, because they could not modify themselves.

Jeffrey records numerous letters and diary entries from reluctant female emigrants, “who shuddered at the idea of undertaking a ‘long and perilous journey’” but “did not openly oppose their husbands” (42). Once in the settlements, it was the women who could not adapt to the hardships of frontier life, who suffered further still. “No settlers,” Kirkland warns, “are so uncomfortable as those who [...] set out with a determination to live as they have been accustomed to live” (*New Home* 88-89).

Fuller quickly observed, like her contemporaries, that women settled in the west predominantly out of duty to husbands and fathers.

It has generally been the choice of the men, and the women follow, as women will, doing their best for affection’s sake, but too often in heart-sickness and weariness. Beside it frequently not being a choice or conviction of their own minds that it is best to be here, their part is the hardest, and they are least fitted for it. (38)

In 1833, because of her father’s retirement from politics, Fuller had herself been forced to move with her family to what Kolodny calls “crushing rural drudgery” at the family homestead in Groton, Massachusetts (119). Only forty miles from Boston, Fuller experienced the same economic hardships, family tragedy and loneliness she saw multiplied in the west.

In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1844), the text that grew and developed from “The Great Lawsuit” and “was informed by the new insights (and the frustrated fantasies) awakened on the prairies but only imperfectly analyzed in *Summer on the Lakes*” (Kolodny 129), Fuller wrote of the “great radical dualism,” in which “there is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman” (*Woman* 68-69), and in the west she saw the impediment of gender expectation magnified by the domestic realities of the settler experience.

This was most apparent for her when it came to leisure, as men and women were transformed into beast of burdens.

Refined graces, cultivated powers, shine in vain before field laborers, as laborers are in this present world; you might as well cultivate heliotropes to present to an ox. Oxen and heliotropes are both good, but not for one another. (*Summer* 76)

Most shockingly for Fuller, the women she encountered were largely unprepared to “live and aspire” in the morass of domestic labour. Whereas their men had recreation “with the gun and fishing-rod,” women had fewer resources for non-domestic activities:

When they can leave the housework, they have not learnt to ride, to drive, to row, alone. Their culture has too generally been that given to women to make them “the ornaments of society.” They can dance, but not draw; talk French, but know nothing of the language of flowers; neither in childhood were allowed to cultivate them, lest they should tan their complexions. Accustomed to the pavement of Broadway, they dare not tread the wildwood paths for fear of rattlesnakes! (38-39)

Yet, if one was going to adhere to the belief that woman’s true sphere of influence was in the family home, then the practical alternative for Fuller was to simplify and strengthen the expectations of domestic necessity. Furthermore, “a few studies, music, and the sincere and familiar intercourse” did not have to be abandoned in a life in “the woods,” and they could certainly be achieved “in the absence of parties, morning visits, and milliner’s shops” (40). The “false pleasure” of feminine accomplishments and the “self-retraining decorum” expected by society, denied, in Fuller’s philosophy, the “electrical, the magnetic element in woman” and her “creative genius” (*Woman* 83, 61). Society stripped music and female musicians of their creative power, reducing music to a function of leisure, and adherence to a singular notion of feminine musicianship had rendered it small and impractical.

Leisure for the settlers of the prairies had become the domain of the men, and not because of power, but rather privilege. The problem was not with the features of feminine education per se, but women’s inability to apply the skills of their learning to a new environment and society’s reluctance to let them. A classical masculine education could be just as inappropriate to western life as feminine accomplishments, but Fuller observed that men had the opportunity and privilege to modify their learning for another circumstance.

Fuller knew only too well the extent to which music dominated feminine education in her society. From the outset, her concerns about the piano as a feminine and domestic object are well-grounded in her own experience, one that may explain her occasional dislike for the instrument: “As for pianists, we must confess to little pleasure in them, and do not wonder the great genius sneered at them as ‘harpsichord

knights” (“Entertainments” 57).<sup>9</sup> The importance of music for Fuller was the product of an extensive musical education. Her father Timothy was determined to provide his daughter with the classical education usually denied girls, but he never disregarded the importance of domestic and traditional feminine pursuits. In a letter to his wife from 1820, Timothy declared that, Sarah Margaret’s “habits of reading *solid books* & acquiring a knowledge of household affairs, sewing &c, should be continually attended to” (Capper 53).

For several years, young Sarah Margaret had personally added music to that list, as shown in a letter to her father from January 1818, when he was a congressman in Washington DC: “I hope to make greater proficuncy of my Studies I have learned all the rules of Musick but one” (*Letters* 1: 81). Less than two months later, the eight-year-old reasserted her interest in music, with the hope of material gain, declaring, “I think I have improved a good deal in writing and I can sing one part whil Aunt Abigail sings another. I geuss you will buy my pianno forte [...]” (*sic*) (*Letters* 1: 83). Music studies were a given in the education of a privileged American girl in the early nineteenth century, but Timothy Fuller expected nothing less than brilliance from his eldest child and Margaret consequently became a very competent musician indeed. Timothy advised Margaret in 1820 that “[t]o excel in all things should be your constant aim; mediocrity is obscurity” (Capper 53).

Mediocrity was never a concern for the young Margaret Fuller, but despite her life-long love for music, it was just one item on a long list of educational requirements. In an 1825 letter to Susan Prescott, a former teacher, we can see the time Fuller devoted to music in an already busy day:

You keep me to my promise of giving you some sketch of my pursuits. I rise a little before five, walk an hour, and then practice on the piano, till seven, when we breakfast. Next I read French,—Sismondi’s *Literature of the South of Europe*,—till eight, then two or three lectures in Brown’s *Philosophy*. About half-past nine I go to Mr. Perkin’s school and study Greek till twelve, when, the school being dismissed, I recite, go home, and practice again until dinner, at two. Sometimes, if the conversation is very agreeable, I lounge for half an hour over the dessert, though rarely so lavish of time. Then, when I can, I read two hours in Italian, but I am often interrupted. At six, I walk, or take a drive. Before going to bed, I play or sing, for half an

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<sup>9</sup> Here Fuller refers to Johann Sebastian Bach, who was relatively indifferent to the “newfangled pianofortes” that were attracting attention amongst musicians in the 1730s and 40s (Loesser 39).



hour or so, to make all sleepy, and, about eleven, retire to write a little while in my journal, exercises on what I have read, or a series of characteristics which I am filling up according to advice. Thus, you see, I am learning Greek, and making acquaintances with metaphysics, and French and Italian literature. (*Letters* I: 151)

Although “what Margaret did” does not suggest a pattern for all American girls, the musicologist Nicholas E. Tawa uses extracts from this example to illustrate the time some girls devoted to music (*High-Minded* 157). However, feminine accomplishments for Margaret Fuller were not simply for the achievement of “polite feminine grace” and her father was adamant that music should be approached with the same hope of excellence as any academic subject: “*All accomplishments, & the whole circle of the virtues & graces should be your constant aim, my dear child*” (Capper 53). In this regard, her relatively typical music education was designed to produce a less than typical result, but Fuller was able to apply her education to her adult life and the development of the self. It was not music for accomplishment’s sake alone.

The “city education” Fuller censures in *Summer on the Lakes* is not the same schooling model she herself experienced, but it is clearly the curriculum learnt by the girls she meets on the banks of the Fox River, who are her ideal of western femininity. “The young ladies were musicians, and spoke French fluently, having been educated in a convent.” Perfectly sheltered in their home that “seemed like a nest in the grass, so thoroughly were the buildings and all the objects of human care harmonized with what was natural,” the “young ladies” are not spoiled by the expectations of “shops and streets, and the vulgarities of city ‘parties.’ [...] Here in the prairie, they had learned to take care of the milk-room, and kill the rattlesnakes that assailed their poultry yard” (24).

Based in part on the description of these girls, Nicole Tonkovich sees in Fuller’s observations of western women an encoded “class hierarchy based on ‘natural’ entitlement” (68),<sup>10</sup> which is important to acknowledge both in terms of Fuller’s conception of social status and her championing the girls’ musicality. This

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<sup>10</sup> Tonkovich actually declares the young ladies of Fox River the product of private education distinct from the “city education” of Fuller’s text, which she names as the seminary model developed by Catharine Beecher (68-69). Nevertheless, it is quite clear that Fuller is against the model of education that teaches girls to be “the ornaments of society” and “talk French, but know nothing of society [...]” (39), which is remarkably similar to her description of the Fox River girls’ accomplishments.

episode smacks of class bias and hints at a double standard in Fuller's musical ideals, suggesting that it is acceptable for a "lady" to learn French and music, but not for "seminary-educated social climbers," as Tonkovich puts it (68). She takes from Fuller's label "musician" the practice of feminine accomplishments Catharine Beecher protested against in the *Treatise*, and ignores Fuller's Transcendentalist take on the same social issue.

Here, the Writer would protest against the common practice, in wealthy families, of having the daughters learn to play on the piano, whether they have taste and ear for music, or not. No young lady, who cannot sing, and has no great fondness for music, does anything but waste time, money, and patience, in learning to play on the piano. (Beecher, *Treatise* 260)<sup>11</sup>

Tonkovich further defines the Fox River ladies as "natural aristocrats whose gentility is the product of birth and thus cannot be effaced by barnyard labor" (69) and although this ideology lies at the heart of Kirkland's "American Amaryllis" (Kolodny 145), I do not believe it holds up to Fuller's wider discussion of womanhood. Tonkovich's attempts to alert the reader to Fuller's semantic use of "ladies" versus "women," supposedly betraying her engagement in the process of social differentiation which assumes "that only white, literate, and well-born ladies may name themselves as such and have those acts of naming be universally endorsed" (70), does raise the valid question as to how Fuller would define "the sex of those who aided in domestic labor" (Tonkovich 68-69). Nevertheless, this semantic criticism reads Fuller through a nineteenth-century feminist hegemony based on Catharine Beecher's practical concerns for the women of the west as set out in the *Treatise*.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it fails to acknowledge the social and Transcendental

<sup>11</sup> In my Introduction I quote the revised version of this from *The American Woman's Home* (1869).

<sup>12</sup> Tonkovich's argument is also reminiscent of Sarah Stickney Ellis's call for a united womanhood: "The grand error of the day seems to be, that of calling themselves *ladies*, when it ought to be, their ambition to be *women* [...]" (142-43). Of course, the place in society that Ellis hoped all women would aspire to, "the minor wheels and secret springs of the great machine of human life and action [...]" (143) was contrary to Fuller's ideals of equality and "outward freedom for woman as much as for man" (*Woman* 20). It is also worth noting that this criticism of Fuller has similarities to Nathaniel Hawthorne's characterisation of Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*. It is widely accepted that Zenobia resembles Fuller, and Coverdale's description of Zenobia's city drawing room stands in stark relief to the communal existence at Blithedale farm: "On the way, I heard a piano, in which I felt Zenobia's character, although heretofore I had known nothing of her skill upon the instrument" (162). The "true character" of Zenobia—"passionate, luxurious, lacking simplicity, not deeply refined, incapable of pure and perfect taste"—is revealed to Coverdale as "self-complacent, condescending," and "[critical] of a system to which many individuals [...] had contributed their all of earthly endeavor, and their loftiest aspirations" (165).

concerns of Fuller's Boston Conversations and later journalism, primarily her philosophy of a united humanity, which accepted "[t]here is but one law for souls."

Yet, then and only then, will mankind be ripe for this, when inward and outward freedom for woman as much as for man shall be acknowledged as a right, not yielded as a concession. (*Woman* 20)

The "wives of the poorer settlers" are not "slatterns" because of their class status and lack of middle-class mores; they are reduced to a societal label of slatterns because "their labors are disproportioned to their strength" (72). Conversely, if to be a lady is defined by privilege, then, despite the unarguable nineteenth-century conventions of class and education, in Fuller's text of womanhood, the greatest privilege of the young ladies of Fox River is the freedom to apply their convent education, or whatever education they may have received, to the daily realities of prairie life. Significantly, they do not appear to have a piano and their musicianship is not compromised by the lack of this object. Indeed, Fuller's text asserts that it is actually strengthened.

Middle-class women were just as unprepared for the domestic labour experienced by all in the burgeoning settlements, but in Fuller's eyes they made matters worse for themselves by adhering to an inflexible understanding of femininity. The piano is perhaps the most insidious symbol of this oppression, because it suggests luxury and leisure. Women were therefore excluded from the poetic self-expression they supposedly inspire in their muse-like capacity. They are unable to unite their "intuitive powers" with "higher instincts" (*Woman* 69), simply because time and social expectation will not allow. Fuller does not say it in so many words, but the untuned, almost unplayable piano signifies the absence of the tools to participate in that leisure. These women performed their womanhood but they could not perform music.

In a clear Transcendentalist voice informed by the personal maxim that "the only object in life was to grow [...]" (*Memoirs* 1:133), Fuller saw Nature as the greatest teacher for the young women of the west: "They lament the want of "education" for their daughters, as if the thousand needs which call out their young energies, and the language of nature around, yielded no education" (*Summer* 39). With regard to music, the key to this practical application of Romanticism was

instrumentation. She suggests that singing would serve the purpose better than a piano.

Singing in parts is the most delightful family amusement, and those who are constantly together can learn to sing in perfect accord. All the practice it needs, after some good elementary instruction, is such as meetings by summer twilight, and evening firelight naturally suggest. And, as music is universal language, we cannot but think a fine Italian duet would be as much at home in the log cabin as one of Mrs. Gore's novels. (40)

Fuller dismantles any societal notion that repertoire is governed by instrumentation and promotes the teaching of singing, already an established American custom through the singing schools, and also part of Beecher's educational programme for American women and children, and her "scientific mode of teaching music in schools."

Then, young children could read and sing music as easily as they can read language; and might take any tune, dividing themselves into bands, and sing off, at sight, the endless variety of music that is prepared. [...] This is an amusement, which children enjoy in the highest degree, and it is one that they can enjoy both in the dark weather at home, and in fields and visits abroad. (*Treatise* 260-62)

The similarity between these two calls for singing are not that surprising, even considering the marked difference between Beecher's theory of domestic economy and Fuller's feminism. In a 1845 review of a circular entitled "The Duty of American Women" in the *New-York Tribune*, which Fuller attributes to either Beecher or the woman suffrage advocate Lucy Stone, she "cordially sympathises" with the demonstration of "the vast want that already exists of good means for instructing the children of the nation, especially in the West [...]" (*Tribune* 233). Beecher and Fuller may not have agreed on the outcome that this education might produce, but both women recognise the futility of the current mode of musical education, and recognise that repertoire and instrumentation alone do not govern musical enjoyment and participation.

For the music critic Fuller this also had a far more serious application, that of the development of a distinctly American music. Nature could teach you about how to survive in the wilderness and it could also provide the impetus for new forms of musical expression, irrespective of genre. The afternoon flights of the pigeons across the prairie sky, encouraged Fuller thus:

Had I been a musician, such as Mendelssohn, I felt that I could have improvised a music, quite peculiar, from the sound they made, which should have inclined all the beauty over which their wings bore them (29-30).

Fuller celebrates the natural music of the prairie, but she is also aware of how “earthly music” might transform the scene and her personal response to nature: “I should like to hear some strains of the flute from beneath those trees, just to break the sound of the rapids” (149).

One contemporary musicologist whom we know influenced Fuller was the English Romantic William Gardiner. She wrote in a letter to Caroline Sturgis in January 1838 that she spent Christmas Day ill on the sofa reading Gardiner’s recently published *The Music of Nature*. She had been recommended the book by Ralph Waldo Emerson (Capper 228), and proclaimed to Sturgis, “[i]t is a most fascinating book, has solved for me many doubts and confirmed many cherished opinions” (*Letters* 1: 322). The importance of nature in Gardiner’s text is largely concerned with transcribing the sounds of nature, but is based on the philosophical premise that music and musical taste are inspired by the true expressions of the everyday sounds around us (Gardiner v).

There is nothing in nature that arouses our attention, or impresses our feelings more quickly, than a sound; whether it be the tone of sorrow – the note of joy – the voices of a multitude – the roar of the winds or the waters – or the soft inflections of the breeze – we are equally awakened to that sense of terror, pleasure, or pain, which sounds create in us. (Gardiner 1)

In her experience as a music critic, which I will discuss in further detail below, Fuller was extremely keen to see the introduction of American compositions to concert repertoire and a *New-York Tribune* review from 1845 of the Swedish violinist Ole Bull shows her enthusiasm for American music, or at least music inspired by America:

Last Autumn we heard the compositions which may be claimed as American, in so far as they have this country for their birth-place, and we owe their existence to the action of its scenes on the mind of the Artist. We esteem them grand and beautiful compositions. The “Solitude of the Prairie” was far the most satisfactory to us, as to others, or, if not so at the time, it certainly is in recollection (*Tribune* 244).



On the prairies Fuller saw the potential for inspiration from a unique environment, but in her writings on the nature of artistic genius, she rejected the belief that inspiration alone created genius, which the musicologist Ora Frishberg Saloman considers atypical for her time ("Beethoven" 90-91). Instead, she believed it was a product of a dual process of intuition and intellection. In the words of her persona *Free Hope*, "[o]nly the dreamer shall understand realities, though, in truth, his dreaming must not be out of proportions to his waking!" (*Summer* 79).

Yet in regard to Fuller's descriptions of American musical life, how could an intuitive and thinking creativity take hold in an environment with only limited musical opportunities? How could a composer like Mendelssohn be produced in Boston, let alone Fox River, Illinois? Fuller's assertion that "[t]here is no poetical ground-work ready for the artist in our country and time" (*Papers* 2: 110) was based in a desire to hear a unique American musical voice, but it also recognised that only a few could reach the heights of musical genius.

Fuller said of her country, "[t]hough music is not a plant native to this soil, it is one that there has always been a desire to cultivate" ("Entertainments" 52), and the essential problem with the frontier piano was that it openly questioned the means and practices of that musical cultivation. Fuller saw no virtue in recreating the expectations of the European drawing room on the prairies and presented an alternative which is linked to her hopes for a distinctly American musical voice. The idealism of the west promised for Fuller a genuine response to Nature and the development of a true national voice and spirit: "Everywhere the fatal spirit of imitation, of reference to European standards, penetrates, and threatens to blight whatever of original growth might adorn the soil" (*Summer* 39).

The performance practice of the European drawing room was simply not feasible in the frontier situation, but performance practice is not musical thought and nor is it repertoire. Therefore, Fuller's call for a new musical situation must not be seen as incompatible with her enthusiasm for Beethoven and German Romanticism. Nicholas E. Tawa sees in the antebellum period an anxious concern that "[a]rt music was not entirely immune to the test of practicability" (*High-Minded* 27). He argues that Fuller's query as to "[w]hether the arts can be at home among us" is representative of the time, and that it shows her practical consideration of whether

the desire to cultivate art music was “merely one of our modes of imitating older nations; or whether it springs from a need of balancing the bustle and care of daily life by the unfolding of our calmer and higher nature” (*Papers* 2: 108).

Clearly the concept of an art for art’s sake had to bow to the imperative of art for life’s sake, particularly when the recipients of this art were living closer to the bone than would be later generations. (Tawa 27)

In the context of Fuller scholarship, her concerns about the piano should be addressed on the basis of her own individual response to music and her active participation in the promotion of European music in Boston and New York concert life. Without conforming to the “brand of transcendentalism that sought to refute America’s European ancestry in favour of the blank page of a distinctly New World present” (Taylor, *Henry James* 100), Fuller sought to encourage Americans to take the best that European art music and musical thought had to offer, and use it in conjunction with inspiration from the Nature around them. “Music,” she wrote in 1842, “is the great living, growing art, and great lives are not yet exhausted in the heaping up this column of glory.” It was “the inward spiritual movement of our time” and Americans needed to grow with it, so music could “find its asylum, find its voice” in a new world (“Entertainments” 53).

Fuller’s musical experience coupled with a philosophical and socially-concerned mind made her one of the leading music critics of her day, but she is too often relegated by recent scholarship to the role of arch-Beethoven fan and musical fanatic. Her well-anthologised “letter” to Beethoven from 1843 is a common example provided of her musical ideology and appreciation. Margaret Fuller, famous for intellectually meeting and besting the men of the Boston and New York literary communities, is typically presented musically, kneeling at the altar of the great master with all the subservience of a nineteenth-century daughter, lover and wife.

But thou, Oh blessed Master, dost answer all my questions, and make it my privilege to be. Like a humble wife to the sage or poet, it is my triumph that I can understand, can receive thee wholly, like a mistress I arm thee for the fight, like a young daughter I tenderly bind thy wounds. Thou art to me beyond compare, for thou art all I want. No heavenly sweetness of Jesus, no many leaved Raphael, no golden Plato, is anything to me, compared with thee. (Chevigny 61-2)

For all the importance this extract holds in understanding Fuller's response to German Romantic music and the cultural position of Beethoven in the mid-nineteenth century, it is still a private expression of musical admiration. Beethoven was in fact the subject of many of her musical writings and his influence on her philosophy of musical genius is unarguable.<sup>13</sup> Saloman credits Fuller and the music critic John Sullivan Dwight with introducing the American public to Beethoven, being amongst the "earliest to write original, as opposed to borrowed or reprinted, accounts of Beethoven's music in publications not entirely devoted to music ("Beethoven" 89): "She transmitted a genuine enthusiasm for music, a recognition of the outstanding power of Beethoven's symphonies, and a central interest in Beethoven as an artist and human being" (90). But Beethoven does not solely explain Fuller's wider concerns about music's role in society.

Fuller was not a professional musician, but was an important figure in the early development of music performance in the United States, through her music criticism in *The Dial* and from 1844-46, *The New-York Tribune*, for which she wrote twenty-nine music related articles. In the 1840s there was no permanent American music journal and Saloman writes that the readership of the *New-York Tribune* alone, some quarter of a million subscribers, suggests that "Fuller's views on the aesthetic and practical issues in music reached a large audience" ("Musical Life" 430).

If the values and contextual issues of American musical life in the nineteenth century are illuminated most successfully through a perspective "centered on Europe and the concert hall" [...] then Margaret Fuller can serve as an intelligent guide to its early period. ("Musical Life" 428)

Fuller was conscious of writing for an audience who had very little experience of classical music and concert norms. The musical world she knew in New England was domestic and limited, but by no means unappreciated.

The piano and the flute have long been domesticated, and of late the harp and guitar, though it is rarely that we find a tolerable performer on either. Ballad-singing, in a limited range, is really loved. ("Entertainments" 52-53)

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<sup>13</sup> For a detailed study of Fuller's response to Beethoven, her influence on American music life in the mid-nineteenth century and her departure from the musical attitudes of the Transcendental Circle see Ora Frishberg Saloman's 1992 article "Margaret Fuller on Beethoven in America, 1839-1846."

Performances of large scale works, such as symphonies and oratorios, were often incomplete because of the lack of musicians. Despite the almost unprecedented popularity for Beethoven in Europe since his death in 1827, the complete symphonies were not performed in the United States until the first half of the 1840s and only then in Boston and New York (Saloman, "Beethoven" 89).

Relative experts like Fuller and Dwight only knew some works from the score, having never had the opportunity to hear the works in concert. Indeed, a bad performance of a good piece was objectionable, but not as objectionable as never having the opportunity to hear it at all. In particular, her *New-York Tribune* review of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony from 22 May 1846 expresses the importance she placed on repertoire exposure.

The Ode to Joy was an entire failure owing to the want of voices fitted to sustain such works and such music; still it was very obvious what it must be when adequately given. It was, indeed, a pity to hear such a screeching, shrilling, and jarring, when a world-wide gush of soul, equally magnificent in the poet and the musician, demanded the noblest tones, in the most perfect unison of which human nature is capable, still we are glad even to have heard it, even so. (*Tribune* 428)

Fuller believed that Americans had to be educated in the ways of the concert hall and her famous long review in *The Dial* from 1842, "Entertainments from the Past Winter," shows her concern with Boston's performance practice. A particular point of contention, and one shared by Dwight, was the programming practice of dividing the movements of longer works, such as symphonies and oratorios, with lighter instrumental pieces and songs, "almost destroying the effect of the work as a whole" (63). The unity of the work had to be maintained, so that the audience might come to understand the music aesthetically and not reduce it to its purely social function.

This was a common concern of the day, but for Fuller the experience of hearing music had to transcend the business of performance and concert-going, because music had "the power to evoke a higher realm of beauty, truth, and the imagination transcending prosaic material existence" (Saloman, "Beethoven" 93-94). "A people who hear good music well performed, and in a way that does not disguise its meaning," she wrote in the *New-York Tribune* in December 1845, "cannot long fancy that it is meant to tickle the ear, but will find that the soul is reached also."

("German Opera"). Throughout her musical journalism, Fuller's discussion of the talents of individual performers, concert practice, the nature of genius and the misbehaviour of the audiences, is always combined with an encouragement for her readers to understand the importance of the music, as a voice of the age and as a means of personal transcendence.

Fuller's review style, reliant on a subjective poetic voice, has been misinterpreted by some critics as a lack of musical experience and authority. Her music reviews are tarred by the same brush that causes some critics, such as Perry Miller, to dismiss *Summer on the Lakes* as an "intolerable monstrosity" full of "ad hoc poetic flights" (qtd. in Smith xiii), preferring instead to anthologise the extracts of "social thought" (Chevigny 316). Bell Gale Chevigny says "Fuller's poems, stories, and art and music criticism are too subjective or diffuse to provide much interest now," thus consigning them to an historical obscurity apart from her essays (155).<sup>14</sup> More sympathetically, Margaret Vanderhaar Allen in her 1979 book, *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller*, argues that,

Fuller's comments on music do not have the same authority or breadth of knowledge as her literary criticism. She knew literature better, though she loved music more, not only for its unsurpassed power to unite and communicate but also because more than any other art, music lent to humankind – and to her – a "winged existence." (91)

From a twentieth-century perspective, it is perhaps understandable to doubt the authority of a music critic who scatters her reviews with poetic odes to the spiritual importance of the art, but while it may be true to say Fuller "loved music more" it is a little patronising to suggest that she knew it less. Part of the problem is a recent lack of understanding that in the nineteenth century, music criticism was a part of general literature and, as Ruth Solie points out, it "was as likely from George Eliot or Friedrich Nietzsche as from Robert Schumann or George Grove" (6). Saloman acknowledges that Dwight was the more knowledgeable in musical matters (96), and more specifically, that Fuller's belief in Beethoven as an idealised democrat is flawed, but only because she did not, as we do today, have access to the private documents which reveal his "more than occasional lapses in liberal

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<sup>14</sup> Smith criticises the literary convention "of editing out what are perceived as the digressions to focus on single sections of the book. [...] It is a standard that ignores both the unique context from which Fuller's text flows and the fact that it was self-consciously a part of an important literary tradition" (xiii-xiv).



humanitarianism" (101). Yet, as Saloman's research into Fuller's music criticism shows, her philosophical digressions beyond the matter of performance practice are essential in understanding the wider issues of music in mid-nineteenth-century America and Fuller's own beliefs about music in her society.

Without those "ad hoc poetic flights," it would be easy to see a contradiction between her Europe and concert hall-centred ideas of music and the call to dispense with pianos in the west. Fuller is not assigning one set of musical rules for the east that focuses on the development of orchestras and repertoire, and another for her Edenic paradise in the west. *Summer on the Lakes* is not a prelapsarian fancy that decrees singing only for western folk, but rather, it reinforces her continued critical attempts to promote music of all varieties to all Americans.

Allen writes that on the position of art and music in the hierarchy of human expressions Fuller "diverged from her fellow Transcendentalists, for whom art was only one expression of the spirit" (62). Without doubting its positive influence on society, Fuller saw music as the greatest medium for the expression of humanity.

Music is the great art of our time. Its dominion is constantly widening, its powers are more profoundly recognized. In the forms it has already evolved, it is equal to representing any subject, can address the entire range of thoughts and emotions. (*Papers* I: 104)

Nevertheless, unlike her contemporary Dwight, who declared music to be "the aspiration and yearning of the heart for communion, which cannot take place through words and thoughts [...]" ("Concerts" 124), Fuller did not assign to music an intrinsic spirituality or moral purpose. Instead, she took her philosophical influence from Goethe's understanding that "music cannot affect morality, nor can the other arts, and it is always wrong to expect them to do so" (Goethe 199), thereby validating artistic endeavour as the expression of humanistic principles.<sup>15</sup>

Good music was not inherently moral, and neither did it contain, as Goethe feared, a little too much of the "*dämonisch*" (Allen 62)—that demonic power that had the potential to awaken woman's sexuality. Fuller recognised that such didactic intent inevitably forced a hierarchical standard onto genre and style, thereby pronouncing that one variety of musical self-expression was more valid and

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<sup>15</sup> See Allen's *The Achievement of Margaret Fuller* (1979) for a more detailed analysis of Goethe's influence on Fuller, and Saloman's article "Margaret Fuller on Beethoven in America, 1839-1846" for a discussion of the influence of Goethe and Coleridge on Fuller's conception of art (102-104).

“musical” than another. Except for Handel’s *Messiah*, Dwight believed that instrumental music was superior to music with text: “He attached an essentially religious function to abstract instrumental music by Beethoven, Mozart and Haydn in the belief that it brought humanity into higher unity with the Infinite” (Saloman “Beethoven” 97). In keeping with the musical theories of his day, Dwight declared that “[w]ith the growth of musical taste [...] one acquires a more and more decided preference for instrumental music, rather than song; music *pure*, rather than music wedded with another art, which never can be quite congenial” (“Concerts” 127).

Specific to this analysis, musical hierarchy essentially relegated domestic music to a lesser position in expressivity than a performance in a concert hall. Fuller declared that it was creativity and true expression that denoted musical worth or “music *pure*,” and not performance practice irrespective of social situation and necessity. She wrote in December 1845 that she wanted Americans to have the opportunity to hear and appreciate “all kinds of excellence from all parts of the world” (“German Opera”) and her developing musical taste can be charted in *Summer on the Lakes*. Whereas once she had “been much amused, when the strain proper to the Winnebago courting flute was played to me on another instrument, at anyone fancying it a melody,” her interaction with the Native American communities on the prairie and the understanding of the environment that inspired the music, allowed her to hear “the notes in their true tone and time” (106). Music, art and dance did not have to “describe the polite movements of society;” they could be “expressive of wild scenery” and they could also find “room both for fun and fancy” (146).

In 1938 Theodor Adorno wrote that “[t]he liquidation of the individual is the real signature of the new musical situation” (293). Referring to the perceived decline in musical tastes in the mid-twentieth century and the dislocation between the “incomprehensibility” of art music and the “inescapability” of popular music, he saw that there was no room for the individual because all music was “still manipulated for reasons of marketability” (293). This is a very different musical situation from Fuller’s criticism of the piano girl, but if we put this ideology of the commoditisation of art through Fuller’s Romantic lens, we might use the terminology to describe Fuller’s musical and social concerns.

The liquidation of the individual is most apparent in *Summer on the Lakes*, in the famous, semi-autobiographical story of Mariana. An eccentric and passionate girl, with “her love of wild dances and sudden song, her freaks of passion and of wit” (51), Mariana was quite unprepared at school to find “herself in the midst of a world which despised her” (54). Yet the narrator declares her “a fine sample of womanhood, born to shed light and life on some palace home” (61), especially when compared to “the careless shining dames of society” (60). Like the Seeress of Prevorst, Fuller’s other *Summer on the Lakes* story about a woman of extraordinary creative and receptive powers, Mariana comes to stand “for the woman powerless to be understood, or even to survive with her gifts, in the world as it is” (Kolodny 125). “What [they] wanted to tell, [the world] did not wish to hear” (*Summer* 61) and they are condemned to madness and early death.

Fuller is explicit in *Summer on the Lakes* that society’s rejection of the individual soul threatens the greater cultural consciousness, and both these stories are embodiments of what Kolodny sees as Fuller’s “reverent faith to woo the mighty meaning of the scene [...] a new order, a new poetry from this chaos” (*Summer* 18) (Kolodny 125). They are the products of individual self-expression, but while Mariana and the Seeress of Prevorst are important voices in Fuller’s wider text about how society thwarts the creative genius of woman, it is important to remember that Fuller’s concerns about the western piano are directed to a far more fluid and encompassing understanding of womanhood. Ordinary women must be allowed their musical transcendence as well, and they must not be expected “to move by rule” (Oakes Smith 199). “There would be unison in variety, congeniality in difference,” Fuller wrote in “The Great Lawsuit” (21), and this is as true for Mariana as it is for the “sweet and gentle hostess” Fuller stayed with in Wisconsin who was “confined to a comfortless and laborious indoor life” (*Summer* 72).

Returning to Fuller’s conviction that “we cannot but think a fine Italian duet would be as much at home in the log cabin as one of Mrs. Gore’s novels” (40), we can read an intrinsic unity between Fuller’s practical concerns about the piano as a requirement of the domestic sphere and music as the hope for individual growth. Unlike Dwight’s belief in the superiority of music free from text or “wedded to another art,” Fuller asked that “all works of literature and the arts be judged as

autonomous entities without reference to their intent, function, or the private circumstances surrounding their creation” (Saloman, “Beethoven” 97). Furthermore, she stressed the need to appreciate the best music can offer humanity, while still hoping for a practical application of music appropriate to circumstance. Put bluntly, Fuller wanted everyone to hear Beethoven played by an excellent orchestra, but realised that there was absolutely no point dragging a half-broken piano thousands of miles to hear no music at all.

She is very publicly declaring that it is the music rather than the object that needs to be transported; not for the sake of genteel pursuits, but for the need of music to preserve the soul. Italian operas may appear more appropriate to the “silver-fork” novels of Mrs. Gore, with their peers and poetry, but they are just at home in the splendour of the Illinois prairie. A fine Italian duet does not need an orchestra or concert hall to sound beautiful or to lighten the lives of those who sing it, though Caroline Kirkland’s Mrs Clavers is self-conscious about her own musical revelry while riding in the Michigan forests.

I took the opportunity of trying old Jupiter’s nerves and the woodland echoes, by practising poor Malibran’s “Tourment d’Amour,” at the expense of the deepest recess of my lungs...and I still amused myself by arousing the Dryads, and wondering whether they ever heard a Swiss *refrain* [...]. (*New Home* 253)

Yet, no doubt to Fuller’s approval, she was inspired by the “fairy music, ‘gushes of wild song,’ soft, sighing murmurs” of the woods (252).

Fuller wrote of a land full of natural music, and although she felt that the “western woods suggest a different kind of ballad” (73), would see no reason for Mrs Clavers to apologise for “singing in the woods” (254). Even Fuller herself once admitted while travelling that, “I should like, however, to hear some notes of earthly music to-night” (149), but more importantly, Mrs Clavers’s song is a true spontaneous outburst of feeling, utterly in keeping with the enthusiasm Fuller once wrote in a letter to Emerson:<sup>16</sup>

I shall be content whenever I am in a state of unimpeded energy and can sing at the top of my voice, I don’t care what. Whatever is truly felt has some precious meaning. (*Letters* 3: 209)

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Hudspeth suggests that Fuller may have been reading the manuscript of Emerson’s forthcoming *Essays: Second Series* at the time she wrote this letter. (*Letters* 3: 210).

Although written nearly a century after Fuller's trip to the lakes and set hundreds of miles further west, *Little House on the Prairie* describes a landscape strikingly reminiscent of Fuller's "dream-like, bee-stung, murmuring and musical plains" (*Summer* 46). Music is a constant presence in Wilder's childhood memories of prairie life in the 1870s, and Jan Susina describes the "Little House" books as "auditory landscapes" in which the author "uses music to symbolically link the settlers with the landscape of the prairie and how—over and over again, like a constant refrain—she connects the music of pioneers with the other voices of the prairie" (158). Rather than an "uninhabited locale waiting to be cultivated," the Ingalls family discover on the Kansas prairie "a richly populated landscape that is not quite so barren or as soundless as it might at first appear" (158, 159).

The family are soon able to see more and hear more than an "endless empty land and a great empty sky arched over it" (16), the same "monotony of the land" Fuller first experiences (*Summer* 22). Pa's fiddle and the numerous songs and ballads sung by the family intermingle with the music and sounds of the prairie itself. Nevertheless, the story articulates the same gendered restrictions Fuller saw in her own travels, as it is Pa who is best able to engage with the music around him. Uninhibited by feminine convention, and with his fiddle, he carries his music with him to the west.

Then Pa lifted the fiddle to his shoulders and softly touched the bow to the strings. A few notes fell like clear drops of water into the stillness. A pause, and Pa began to play the nightingale's song. The nightingale answered him. The nightingale began to sing again. It was singing with Pa's fiddle. (43)

Laura's ability to encapsulate the music of the prairie through her father's playing serves to show her own capacity for musical transcendence beyond the social expectations maintained by Ma and Mary, but her attempts to engage with her father's musical voice are always met with Ma's swift call to convention: "It is only the fiddle. And it's time little girls were in bed" (32). She may experience a musical life more in keeping with Fuller's hopes for the west, but gendered expectations still get in the way. Ma is constantly anxious about maintaining civility and lady-like manners, because they function as an antidote to their forced engagement with the requirements of the surrounding environment. She can capably feed the family on limited stores and help Pa protect the cabin from a prairie fire, and once chores are



done, the girls are free to explore the tall grass that surrounded their cabin for mice and prairie chickens, and watch the snakes “rippling between the grass stems,” thereby learning the ways of their new environment (76), but only Pa’s music can openly commune with nature. Laura is perpetually checked that “it isn’t good manners” for her to do the same (26).

What Fuller saw in the west was an exaggeration of problems encountered by eastern women: if music is a means of self-expression and individual growth, then music for accomplishment’s sake did not accomplish anything. Responding similarly to Emerson’s shame in “Self-Reliance” at “how easily we capitulate to badges and names, to large societies and dead institutions” (179), in “The Great Lawsuit” Fuller wrote of “self-dependence and a greater simplicity and fullness of being” (35), and this informed her vision for the west.

Under these terms the piano was symptomatic of a society primarily concerned with material wealth and social status, and the piano part of the catalogue of “Genteel furniture” like those listed for auction in Sarah Hale’s 1846 novel *Boarding Out*.

At 11 o’clock, a first-rate piano-forte of superior tone and finish; also, a beautiful seraphim. A variety of kitchen furniture, consisting of Wedgewood’s Britannia coffee-pots and biggins, and many choice articles of culinary ware too numerous to mention, with which the sale will commence. (19)

This was the economy of musical production Loesser describes as being shaped by sheet music marketing and the branding of pianos. He calls the piano “a feature in the physiognomy of a certain way of life, the way of the moneyed middle-class people, of the *bourgeoisie* [...]” (607), and briefly turning once more to Bourdieu, we might argue that Fuller is recognising that the “commercial value” of the piano—the “symbolic object”—is overwhelming its “cultural value” because of society’s desire to engage with it on purely economic terms (*Cultural Production* 113).

It is somewhat anachronistic to discuss Fuller in Bourdieuan terms, but her fears for music in the economy of status were not unfounded. The myth of the piano girl continued and was maintained in the west, propagated by publications like *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and the desire for pianos and furniture at any cost, and in the following chapter I will look at Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons* (1862) and consider how a consumerist engagement with the myth of the piano girl might not

necessarily inhibit Romantic individual growth. Nevertheless, Fuller's call for singing and not accomplishments was in the hope that all people could, like Pa Ingalls, achieve Romantic subjectivity through musical experience. A musicianship comparable with her descriptions of the prairies themselves: "Now, ye stand in that past day, grateful images of unshattered repose, simple in your tranquillity, strong in your self-possession, yet ever musical and springing as the footsteps of a child" (46).

Susan Phinney Conrad calls *Summer on the Lakes* "a guidebook to romantic perception" (75), and singing in this context evokes a Wordsworthian understanding of the quotidian: "that we need only look on the miracle of every day, to sate ourselves with thought and admiration every day" (*Summer* 79), rather than rely on a transplanted and unnatural musical language. No resigned acceptance that singing will suffice until progress allows for good pianos and orchestras, nor that "we are glad even to have heard it," but a musical response to life and individual growth that desires for each individual "a recreative spirit that sings to sing" ("Entertainments" 46).

## Chapter 3

### Music, Fashion and Self-Reliance in Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*

Never underestimate the power of a label. Merchants of soap, cigarettes, refrigerators, roofing, raincoats, shoes, ships, and sealing wax now understand this very well. Music merchants understood it long ago, before the business fraternity ever made a habit of hiring advertising agents to rub their noses in it.

Arthur Loesser

*Men, Women and Pianos* (506)

Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*, published in 1862, is a book dominated by ideas of consumption and consumerism. Written in the first person narrative style, directly following the lead of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*,<sup>1</sup> the novel tells the story of Cassandra Morgeson's life and self-education from incorrigible ten-year-old to maturity as a subjective sexual woman. In her process of achieving "economic control and enlightened marriage" (Alaimo 35), via an unconsummated but illicit affair with an older married cousin, Cassandra persistently eats, shops, and engages with the consumer world. This is in direct contrast to her uncanny sister Veronica, who controls her domestic seclusion and the people around her through a psychological aversion to food—one that is now obviously a form of anorexia nervosa.<sup>2</sup> Susanna Ryan asserts that "what the novel reveals is that appetitiveness and its satiation are inevitably bound up with the economic demands of commodity culture and the conventional narratives of heterosexual domesticity" (128), and in this chapter I will argue that the same thing can be said about the piano and its role in the ambivalent domesticity and Romantic subjectivity of the Morgeson sisters.

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<sup>1</sup> The association between *Jane Eyre* and Stoddard's writing is well established. The author herself wrote of her "Jane Eyre mania" in an obituary to "Curren Bell" in her regular *Daily Alta California* column (2 June 1855), reprinted in *The Morgesons and Other Writings* (Philadelphia, 1984): 317, and Anne E. Boyd writes that "*The Morgesons* was clearly inspired, in part, by *Jane Eyre*" (Boyd 29). Maria Holgren Troy similarly argues that, "[t]he use of female public personal voice, or female autodiegetic narration, is perhaps the most obvious convergence between *The Morgesons* and *Jane Eyre*" (96).

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed analysis of Veronica's eating habits and the nineteenth-century understanding of anorexia see Ryan's article "'Perversions of Volition': Self-Starvation and Self-Possession in Dickinson and Stoddard" in *American Culture, Canons, and the Case of Elizabeth Stoddard*. (Tuscaloosa, 2003). Gillian Brown also looks at "Anorexia and Anti-consumerism" in her chapter "The Empire of Agoraphobia" in *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley, 1990).

Initially having no purpose beyond the material, the piano is bought by Cassandra's father for the purpose of social status. It signifies the family's new bourgeois desire to participate in "a world of cultivated people, practices and objects," by self-consciously "testifying to their wealth and good taste" (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 75). Indeed, *The Morgesons* is clearly indicative of the social position of the piano in American life as a feminine consumer object. It was an item comparable with "shawls, bonnets, and dresses" (*Morgesons* 23); a thing to be sold in the same shops as sewing-machines, and to be bought by the conspicuous consumers made famous by the late-nineteenth-century economic theory of Thorstein Veblen. That is until Veronica's "persistent fingering of the keys [...] produced a feeble melody," and "[s]he soon played all the airs that she had heard" (24).

In *The Morgesons*, the piano functions as a metonym for both Veronica's interiority and Cassandra's self-aware response to conventional ideas of femininity, highlighting Stoddard's constant interplay between Romantic expression and the pragmatic reality of everyday life. Veronica, the natural musician and piano "genius" is at once an ideal of domestic womanhood—"passive, private and homeloving" (Troy 147)—and a wild, unreadable character who can only be influenced by internal forces. Conversely, the piano enters the headstrong and independent Cassandra's life as a commodity of the domestic space and feminine education, and she at first appears to engage with music only as fashion dictates.

As another critic briefly observes, "economics play an integral part in the setting of the bizarre tone" of this novel (Penner 132), but for this to become a critical approach to reading *The Morgesons*, one must consider far more than the purchasing and eating habits of the characters. Indeed, the novel relates in part to "the way commodity relations came to saturate everyday life" in nineteenth-century American society, as discussed by Bill Brown in his 2003 book *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (5). Brown's study recognises the way in which the economics of an object not only includes "the history of production, distribution, and consumption," but also the complex roles that objects played in American lives" (12), and any economic reading of *The Morgesons* must acknowledge a similar principle.

There are certainly many parallels between Brown's analysis of possessions and "being possessed by possessions" in late-nineteenth-century American prose fiction (5) and the role of the piano in the characterisation of Cassandra and Veronica. In particular, Stoddard explores a similar "imaginative relation to things" that "grants possessions their metonymic power to express character" (152). Furthermore, the way the piano reflects the "slippage or fluctuation between the physical and metaphysical referent" Brown sees in the works of Henry James (141) offers some insight into the "character" of the piano as commodity and possession. Nevertheless, *The Morgesons* is an earlier capitalist view of "the dynamics of objectification, possession, and commodification" (Brown 157), and whereas Brown claims in his studies of works from the latter part of the century that "our relation to things cannot be explained by the cultural logic of capitalism" (5-6), Stoddard's novel seems more willing to allow such a mode of enquiry.

Into my analysis of the complex consumer world of *The Morgesons*, I will introduce a little-known 1893 economic theory entitled "Fashion" by the young English economist, Caroline Foley. Her radical rethinking of fashion as a vital feature of the economy offers a theoretical model for the economic themes within *The Morgesons*. It shifts society's engagement with fashion beyond the status-driven consumerism described by Veblen, and can be applied to the piano, not just as a commodity, but also as instrument for musical expression. Stoddard's piano, like the women who play it, functions according to Foley's economic system, which declared that "no one commodity [...] admits of being produced in one *mode* only" (462). Suggesting—to turn Brown's words around—that this slippage of meaning for the commodity within the "evaluative context" of possession and ownership is very much "the market-as-usual" (13).

"The Morgesons are a New England anomaly," Susan K. Harris writes, "a family that does not feel a connection with a past that will root it in time" (15). Living in "lonely, evangelical, primitive" Surrey, Massachusetts (*Morgesons* 96), they are an old Puritan family without knowledge of even their recent history: "The family recipes for curing herbs and hams, and making cordial, were in better preservation than the memory of their makers" (8). Until Cassandra's great-grandfather, Locke, "the first noticeable man of the name," "*Morgeson—Lived—*



*Died*—were all their archives” (9), or so the narrative claims, despite the countless relatives who constantly visit. Their collective realisation of only the present is in part their heritage, especially when one considers the critical observation that this is “a present that appears to have been unchanged for generations [...]” (Troy 99), but it is also indicative of the society coping with rapid industrialisation.

Cassandra, as Louise Penner discusses, “sets up her father and mother’s limitations along gendered lines of material versus spiritual affinities” (139), but the domestic space is not the feminine and spiritual haven promoted by contemporary writers like Sarah Hale. Locke Morgeson “saw nothing beyond the material,” and Mary Morgeson’s “spiritual insight was confused and perplexing” (*Morgesons* 24). The first of his family line to become a financial success, Cassandra’s father is in the boat building trade—as I will discuss in more depth below, the fluctuating sea is not only the source of Cassandra’s wealth, but her individual strength as well—and he is the very essence of early-nineteenth-century industrial development.<sup>3</sup>

The new vocation of domestic economy, however, never sits comfortably with Mary’s Puritan soul, and she cannot fully accept the conspicuous consumerism of her married life, nor her really rather eccentric daughters. She rules the supposedly feminine space of home with an uncertainty that mirrors the pattern of religious revival and uncertainty in the community.

Mother had severe turns of planning, and making rules, falling upon us in whirlwinds of reform, shortly allowing the band of habit to snap back, and we resumed our former condition. (23)

Consequently, “Veronica and I,” Cassandra claims early on in her narrative, “grew up ignorant of practical or economical ways” (23). In particular, Mary’s “mildness, her dreamy habits, her indifference and her incapacity of comprehending natures unlike her own,” match the erratic, though certainly not incompetent, patterns of their domestic life, and also form the central unifying structure for a family who struggle with what Cassandra calls “[c]omprehension of life, and comprehension of self” (9).

Mary’s only recourse for explaining herself to her daughter is to send Cassandra to the old world of her father’s home, telling her, “I thought you would, by the by, understand me better than I do myself” (46). This is in all respects an act

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<sup>3</sup> Troy discusses how Locke’s name, like his grandfather before him, deliberately evokes John Locke, “the man on whose ideas the Founding Fathers of the United States relied,” but that “his intense fluctuating moods are Romantic, Byronic, rather than Enlightenment characteristics” (100).

of cruelty, because both Cassandra and Veronica know “that Grand’ther Warren nearly crushed” Mary and her sister Mercy (64), yet Mary knows no other way of explaining herself to her daughter. Cassandra’s grandfather was “aboriginal in character, [...] a Puritan, without gentleness or tenderness” (28). His home industry as a tailor was in decline for “[n]o new customers came. A few, who did not change the fashion of their garb, still patronized him” (20). Cassandra enters an eighteenth-century, predestined world of penance and social hierarchy. She is considered “possessed” by her family (5), and the nouveau riche daughter of “a nobody” at school (34). It is on this precipice between the old ways and a new consumer society that the Morgesons teeter, like many other New England families in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Homelife was not the gendered “sanctuary” expounded in an 1830 issue of the Boston-based *Ladies’ Magazine*, where “sympathy, honor, virtue are assembled,” and “disinterested love is ready to sacrifice everything at the altar of affection” (qtd. in Cott 64), and *The Morgesons* makes it quite clear that it never will.

Nancy F. Cott argues in *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* that the socio-economic shift from “agricultural and household-production base” to an industrial economy resulted in widespread uncertainty about traditional social structures and encouraged an “anti-pecuniary bias” in the domestic rhetoric of the day (24, 68). “Our men are sufficiently money-making,” Hale famously wrote as editor of the *Ladies’ Magazine* in 1830, “Let us keep our women and children from the contagion as long as possible.” (qtd. in Cott 68; G. Brown 15; Douglas 57). In Hale’s writing, home was the embodiment of an ideal, femininity removed from market forces and acting in opposition to capitalist structures, but there is no such redemptive domesticity in Stoddard’s novel or her representation of the piano girl. The novel radically engages with the social milieu of economic change and accepts that the market and all its confusions was as much a feature of domesticity as business.

Pianos may have been central to the idealised vision of the American home and feminine life, but the instrument should not be underestimated as representative of this economic and cultural shift. It was not a symbol of traditional music-making, but a new social order of musical mass-marketing, and the Morgesons’ piano inhabits

a brave new world of large scale manufacture, advertising, polka fads, topical songs, and “zealous overproduction” of fashionable music (Loesser 506) that bears little resemblance to musical life a generation earlier. Pianos were bought and sold, just as publications like the *Ladies’ Magazine* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* were maintained through advertising and reader subscription fees, confirming Gillian Brown’s observation that the “construction of a vigilant domesticity that absorbs exterior threats is of course a model of capitalist consumption” (182).

In *The Morgesons* the common lot of women is never glorified and any transcendence experienced by the characters is always circumscribed by a resigned domestic pragmatism. As Sandra A. Zagarell discusses in her article “Strenuous Artistry,” the Morgeson’s domestic environment is never “home,” “in the sense of being secure, knowable, morally grounded and sustaining” (290), as in the sentimental writings of Hale. It is a “prosaic domain” of daily life (*Morgesons* 216), and “the term *quotidian*,” Zagarell continues “suggests the particularity, randomness, and gritty commonplaceness of domesticity as *The Morgesons* portrays it” (290). Music is just one part of the cluttered, ephemeral thingness of domestic life, and accordingly, it can be both the source of Transcendental understanding of self and a feature of the casual quotidian. Even Veronica’s wonderful playing revolves around the discussion of her social improvement or whether Mary knows how to raise children properly (141, 53).

Stoddard’s delightful depiction of sisterly spite over the piano immediately establishes the Morgesons as a family who find it difficult to conform to the social expectations of feminine accomplishments as a domestic application of duty and productivity. Furthermore, it presents music as a significant divide between Cassandra and Veronica.

When I saw what she could do, I refused to take music lessons, for while I was trying to learn “The White Cockade,” she pushed me away, played it, and made variations upon it. I pounded the keys with my fist, by way of a farewell, and told her she should have the piano for her own. (24)

Cassandra recognises her lack of talent immediately, and collective possession of the instrument is relinquished. Like the parlour in which it is housed, the piano quickly forms part of Veronica’s sphere of control, but despite this, music repeatedly returns as part of Cassandra’s erratic education.

“[Veronica’s] talent is wonderful,” said father, taking the cigar from his mouth. “By the way, you must take lessons in Milford; I wish you would learn to sing.” I acquiesced, but I had no wish to learn to play. I could never perform mechanically what I heard now from Verry” (53).

Music is a marker of Cassandra’s pecuniary status as an educated lady, and it turns out that she has a voice, enhanced by her “dramatic talent.” There is no expectation that she will become a “musician,” but Mrs. Lane, the music teacher at Rosville, begs to teach her how to sing and to “learn the simple chords of song accompaniments.” Her voice is “effective” and after a few months Cassandra “could play and sing ‘*Should those fond hopes e’er forsake thee*’, tolerably well.” Furthermore, music becomes a feature through which society chooses to classify her: “people said, when I was mentioned, ‘She Sings’” (78).

In a social environment in which girls from “good” families learned to sing appropriate songs and accompany themselves at the piano competently, Cassandra is utterly conventional. Veronica’s musicianship, however, is an extraordinary, inscrutable thing. Musical talent helps to shape her from the wild girl who “tasted everything, and burnt everything, within her reach” (13) to the controlling, self-taught, and ever-improving teenager who equates physical denial with moral worth. Nevertheless, as her playing gets “better and better” (56), and those around her realise that she has been “endowed with genius” they could not see or hear (59), Cassandra witnesses Veronica’s selfhood through performance: “her fingers interpreting her feelings, touching the keys of the piano as if they were the chords of her thoughts” (56).

Later in the novel, when Cassandra returns to Surrey after the death of Charles Morgeson and her own injury, she is reduced to tears by Veronica’s playing.

Strange girl; her music was so filled with a wild lament that I again fathomed my desires and my despair. Her eyes wandered towards me, burning with the fires of her creative power, not with the feelings that stung me to the quick.” (141)

Veronica, it would seem, is a genius, as her father-in-law Mr. Somers worryingly observes on her and Ben’s wedding day; Cassandra agrees, at least when it comes to music. “A woman of genius is but a heavenly lunatic, or an anomaly sphered between the sexes,” she declares to Mr. Somers (242)—an anomaly indeed, because Veronica tells us as little about the average nineteenth-century piano girl, as Emily

Dickinson does about well-read girls of the time. As Ryan writes, "Dickinson can inhale, and Veronica can play, but neither has been influenced from without" (Ryan 138). Or so they claim.

Veronica performs potentially dangerous improvised music and her playing is "an outlet for irrepressible passions" (Corbin 533), but any similarities to a character like Madame de Staël's *Corinne* end at her talent for improvisation. For all her uncanny temperament and musicality, her self-imposed sphere is domestic. Her bedroom and the parlour form her subjective centre, with the justification that, "If the landscape were wider, I could never learn it" (135). Furthermore, her artistic expressivity is limited to a very recognisable form of what Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar call the "aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty" which "obliged 'genteel' women to 'kill' themselves into art objects [...]" (*Madwoman* 25), and *The Morgesons* remains ambivalent about such easily wrought Romanticism. With her music, visions, and premonitions, Veronica evokes the stock nineteenth-century image of the Romantic, uncanny pianist: "Hair down, face illuminated by candles, eyes vacant, [...]" (Corbin 533). Veronica performs the role, right down to the portrait of St. Cecilia on her bedroom wall (134).

Furthermore, she fulfils a position within her community, accepted by the people of Surrey, because she does not threaten any fundamental principles of her society: "While alluding to the ideology of separate spheres, her chosen confinement does so in a parodic form which suggests the limitations of that ideology" (Zagarell, "Strenuous Artistry" 298). The local women and Morgeson relatives are indeed proud of their odd Veronica, and every time Cassandra returns to Surrey, they comment approvingly on the improvements she has made. They do not extend the same enthusiasm for changes in Cassandra. On one such occasion, Cassandra "inferred from their tone they did not consider the change one for the better" (141), although they are happy to imitate her fashion and her whims (60). Whereas their mother believes that "Veronica's life is not misspent," she advises her favourite daughter to "read the bible and sew more" (64). Cassandra's individualism is far more subversive than anything Veronica does, and this is exemplified in Veronica's statement, "I want to classify Cass" (59). Cassandra, like the novel itself, refuses to be placed comfortably within any classification or mode of womanhood.



In their Introduction to the 1984 edition of *The Morgesons*, Lawrence Buell and Zagarell describe Cassandra as “a rebellious, iconoclastic protagonist striving against nineteenth-century social and religious convention toward an autonomy at once sexual, spiritual, and economic” (xix). The novel “was favorably reviewed, but did not sell” (xix), and much critical attention in recent years has been concerned with the whys and wherefores of Stoddard’s historical obscurity and the place of this most original novel in the canon of nineteenth-century America fiction.<sup>4</sup> Even during her lifetime William Dean Howells was mildly perplexed by her lack of fame, and gave her perhaps the best tribute another fellow writer can give: “In a time when most of us had to write like Tennyson, or Longfellow, or Browning, she never would write like any one but herself” (77).

Zagarell has written in depth about the problems of categorising Stoddard’s work, especially within the paradigms set out by Nina Baym in *Woman’s Fiction* (“Repossession of a Heritage” 45). Julia Stern also writes that *The Morgesons* is an antisentimental book that “engage[s] in trenchant philosophical and political critiques of sentimentalism’s very premises” (109), because, as Harris discusses in “Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*: A Contextual Evaluation,” Cassandra does not face tasks in adult life that “differ from those of her fictional contemporaries; how to find a husband, and how to assume familial responsibilities.” Even Stoddard’s heroes are typical “brooding Byronic” types (17).

Elizabeth Stoddard always asserted herself as a Romantic writer, and resisted Howells’s opinion that the “distinct and special quality” of her writings had “in them a foretaste of realism” (77). “I am *not* realist,” she wrote to Edmund Clarence Stedman in 1888, “I am a *romantic*, the very bareness and simplicity of my work is a trap for its romance” (Buell and Zagarell xxii). From the very first line of the novel, a description of the ten-year-old Cassandra—“‘That child,’ said my aunt Mercy,

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<sup>4</sup> *The Morgesons* has been a notoriously difficult novel for critics to categorise from its publication in 1862. Although critically praised, it never sat comfortably in the canon of American woman’s fiction. Its publication unfortunately coincided with the Civil War and coupled with Stoddard’s unapologetic portrayal of a sexually aware heroine, it was never a commercial success. Even today, scholars are still arguing over why it was ignored and forgotten by the reading public and critics alike. Nevertheless, it did receive critical notice. Hawthorne in particular was most impressed with the novel, as he wrote in a letter to Stoddard from 26 January 1863:

There are very few books of which I take the trouble to have any opinion of at all, or of which I could retain any memory so long after reading them as I do of ‘*The Morgesons*’. I hope you will not trouble yourself too much about the morals of your next book; they may be safely left to take care of themselves. (Matter-Seibel 16)

looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, 'is possessed'" (5)—a Romantic individualist notion of self that grapples with both a Calvinist understanding of predestined character and conventional expectation permeates the entire narrative. Nevertheless, domesticity is an ambivalent trap for feminine subjectivity, because while Stoddard decrees individual experience and articulation of the self as the central objective of all people, it is not mutually exclusive with domestic conventions and responsibilities.

Music's Romantic subjectivity is always framed in *The Morgesons* within the most ordinary and conventional of musical situations. It is a feature of homelife and parties, and this ordinariness of music, or at least the framework of musical experience, is reinforced in Stoddard's 1863 short story "Lemorne *Versus* Huell". Unlike Mrs. Lane, who "cried whenever she sang a sentimental song" (*Morgesons* 78)—perhaps calling into question her musical authority to judge Cassandra's "dramatic talent,"—the protagonist Margaret teaches music out of economic necessity and no longer finds transcendence through her art. The opera in Newport makes Mr. Uxbridge dreamy, like a child, but Margaret can only note the agreeableness of the tenor's voice: "I teach music. I can not dream over 'one, two, three'" ("Lemorne" 272). In betraying her status as a "genteel pauper," Margaret also reveals that the fetishism of Romanticism is lost on someone who must wholeheartedly engage with the commoditisation of art. It is a means to an end.

Another significant example of Stoddard's pragmatic attitude to feminine performance comes from her first publication "My Own Story" of 1860. She sets up a precedent of women's control over domestic music and performative intent. As the title implies, this short story is also written from the perspective of a narrator-heroine—another Margaret—who reveals the motivation and subjectivity within her narrative. Margaret sings at a party and she is clearly mistress of the situation, but does not really manipulate her audience. Rather, she is aware of the conceit of the drawing-room setting and the reasons why she appears to advantage.

When Harry Lothrop asks Margaret if she knows Byron's song "One struggle more and I am free," his suggestive intent of barely submerged emotion is clear. However, Margaret sings it because the music *suits* her voice (536). A calculated decision any musician would deem essential to a good performance. Furthermore, the

champagne she had been drinking has a beneficial effect on her voice and expression of the text.

There was laughing and talking when I began, but silence soon after, for the wine made my voice husky and effective. I sang *as if* deeply moved. (536) (My own italics.)

Margaret does not believe the text she is singing, but is simply performing it well and this scene implies that the morality of a woman is irrelevant to the nature of her musical repertoire and performance practice. Maurice, who is also musical, exclaims, “what a girl!” “she’s really tragic.” But, one suspects he is more aware of the performance techniques at play than the rest of the company. His attentions to her that evening may be genuine, but “good-hearted” and “cheerful,” and do not implicate Margaret in anything more than a bit of male attention.

Returning to *The Morgesons*, Stoddard negotiates this often faint line between amused cynicism at the sentimental emotion portrayed in music and an actual belief in its Romantic power—a realistic attitude this writer finds very refreshing. On the other side of the economic teacher-student exchange experienced in “Lemorne *Versus* Huell,” Cassandra’s lessons are not without their own Romantic associations. Like her namesake the classical prophet, Cassandra is known for her vocal talent, but while Cassandra the prophet is cursed with her communities’ disbelief, Cassandra Morgeson suffers miscomprehension. Furthermore, the first song Cassandra sings to Mrs. Lane is the hymn “*Once on the raging seas he rode*” and her music is linked with her repeated subjective response to “[t]he wide, shimmering plain of sea” (214).

The sea is expansive and strong, but also compassionless, and as observed by Anne E. Boyd is Stoddard’s symbol for the “alternating and arbitrary forces of good and evil” (54). Reflecting the inner conflicts and passions of Cassandra, it is the most Transcendental of all Stoddard’s Romantic tropes, evoking Emerson’s “Self-Reliance”—“Society is a wave. The wave moves onward, but the water of which it is composed does not” (201). Even at its most powerful, the sea’s influence on her decision to take all that life may give her—“its roar, its beauty, its madness”—includes the quotidian (215).

With Cassandra’s maturity of self comes the realisation of her inescapable domestic responsibilities following her mother’s death, and she seemingly gives up

her independence to the sea (215). At the end of the century, Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) abandons herself to the ocean, because she cannot reconcile her awakened self with the social obligation of her role as a wife and mother. Similarly, Cassandra actively rejects "the idea that domestic tasks should be her main occupation" (Boyd 54), but the sea does not consume her, and she does not, like Emerson, see property or materialism as an impediment to self-reliance. She moves with the wave, and the sea reconciles her to the reality of her ever-present and contingent domestic responsibility. She temporarily abandons her Romantic self to the trap of convention.

*The Morgesons* is a novel without didactic intent beyond Stoddard's own literary call, as outlined in her 3 August 1856 column for the *Daily Alta California*, for a "crusade against Duty," wherein she attacked contemporary writers who "compose their good women, with an external preachment about self-denial, moral self-denial" (Stoddard, "Journalism" 325-26). One extraordinary and extremely successful version of such didactic fiction is Augusta Evans's *Beulah*, published in 1859. The heroine, Beulah Benton, is another nineteenth-century piano girl, but of an altogether different mould from that of Veronica or Cassandra. She is as wilful a character as Cassandra, but her astonishing self-education and attempts at independence is shaped, and eventually reformed, by her own belief in what the "true women of America" ought to be: "ornaments of the social circle, angel guardians of the sacred hearthstone, ministering spirits where suffering and want demanded succor" (Evans 140).<sup>5</sup>

Despite Stoddard's intention to counteract such ideology through Cassandra's refusal to conform to the overt and latent Puritanism of her society, her "crusade" is not against "the duty that is revealed to every man and woman of us by the circumstances of daily life, but that which is cut and fashioned for us by minds totally ignorant of our idiosyncrasies and necessities" ("Journalism" 326). Indeed, Cassandra is of the mould of Elizabeth Oakes Smith's "Characterless Women," a woman who is "equal to all contingencies, whose faculties or powers are developed

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<sup>5</sup> Nina Baym writes in *Woman's Fiction* that "Augusta Evans' heroines are the strongest, most brilliant, and most accomplished in the long line of woman's heroines" (278). In particular, Beulah's self-education and literary knowledge led some critics to "scoffingly label" Evans's heroines "walking encyclopedias" (281).

by circumstances, rather than by spontaneous action" (*Morgesons* 199). When Cassandra chooses to take her mother's place at the domestic centre of the Morgesons' world, she decides to "reign, and serve also" (215). Responding to her Aunt Mercy's plea, "Oh, Cassandra, *can* you give up *yourself*?" she resolutely states, "I never [...] mean to have anything to myself—entirely, you know" (215), and as readers we must acknowledge that despite Mercy's fear, Cassandra does not give herself up *entirely*.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the implication of her statement is more to redress her absolute individualism than a vow of renunciation to domestic virtue. She does what is revealed to her by the circumstances of daily life and her own necessities, and that involves resisting the possessed character affixed to her by Mercy and her community.

It is, however, impossible to make *The Morgesons* a practical manifesto on the rights and responsibilities of womanhood in the mid-nineteenth-century United States. The individual is Stoddard's "primary interest" writes Zagarell, and Cassandra and *The Morgesons* is "almost narcissistically apolitical" ("Strenuous Artistry" 305). While she exhibits a remarkable independence of self, she makes no recourse to the woman's rights movement of the period, or any acknowledgement of the larger political issues of the day, for instance, the anti-slavery movement and the Civil War. Stoddard herself admitted in an 1857 *Daily Alta California* column to "a hideous tendency to laugh at strong-mindedness" within political movements, though she considered herself among "the ranks of Women's Rights and Women's Shall Haves, especially in the latter" ("Journalism" 328).<sup>7</sup> In particular, she advocated women's employment and property rights, but her characters are not politically motivated.

The 1862 *New-York Tribune* review of *The Morgesons* by George Ripley commented that "[t]he story will be read as a development of powerful, erratic, individual passion,—a somewhat bitter, perhaps not unwholesome commentary on

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<sup>6</sup> Here Cassandra echoes the words of Zenobia in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* when justifying her reasons for leaving the Blithedale community:

Why should we be content with our homely life of a few months past, to the exclusion of all other modes? It was good; but there are other lives as good or better. Not, you will understand, that I condemn those who give themselves up to do it more entirely than I, for myself, should deem it wise to do. (165)

<sup>7</sup> This article from 11 January 1857 was written about the Woman's Rights Convention held in November 1856.



life and society” (qtd. in Matlock 286). *The Morgesons* can certainly be viewed as a subversive vision of the domestic sphere. “The domestic vision is fraudulent,” in Sybil Weir’s reading of Stoddard’s novel; “family relationships are neurotic and destructive; women are neither moral paradigms nor sexual imbeciles. Social institutions generally are repressive and cruel, reflecting human insanity rather than checking it” (Weir 438).

But I am inclined to agree with Zagarell’s claim that for *The Morgesons* that “‘life’ is not gendered: it *is*” (“Strenuous Artistry” 295). The isolationist individualism of the Morgeson family unit subverts any simple dichotomy between the masculine sphere of public enterprise and feminine domestic space, yet the convention of woman’s place in society remains unchallenged. Not long after Margaret Fuller asked the women of the Illinois prairie to throw off the shackles of small arrangements, and Catharine Beecher was making a political stance of domestic order, Stoddard audaciously wrote about individualist girls who are politically indifferent, consumer-aware and fashion-conscious.

Returning to the piano, it is a commodity of the fashion-conscious world Stoddard depicts, but very little discussion has been made of its place in nineteenth-century economic theories. Its high-art status hides its role as a blatant consumer object. Even Thorstein Veblen makes no mention of the piano—“the bourgeois instrument par excellence” (Bourdieu, *Distinction* 19)—in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899), which famously theorised, and ultimately condemned, the relationship between the supposedly gendered spheres of middle-class American life and consumerism.

Stoddard’s novel is not so quick to draw ethical assumptions about the nature of consumerism. Her characters’ subjective and interdependent response to the consumer world reveals the confusion in her society to the growing institution of high capitalism, and the suspicion that it might have something to offer the individual. Cassandra is clearly a nonconformist, but not in the way Emerson suggests in “Self-Reliance.” She “[i]nsists upon [her]self,” irrespective of “what the people think” (Emerson 199, 180), but she also adheres to fashion, and this mode of imitation does not inhibit her Romantic subjectivity. The “bold sensualist” may also

be self-reliant,<sup>8</sup> and evoking Margaret Fuller, a “recreative spirit” may find inspiration at the transported piano. Stoddard’s novel is open to the consumer realities and hypocrisies of the society it represents, and offers insight into creating an economic theory for the nineteenth-century piano in American domestic life.

Veblen’s radical reconsideration of the nineteenth-century consumer was part of the movement that dismissed the neoclassical economic model of the *homo economicus*, “the Cartesian myth of a stable, coherent, disembodied and atomistic self” (Fullbrook, “Descartes” 408), who purchased according to very specific and predetermined needs in the most efficient means possible.

It has been customary in economic theory, and especially among those economists who adhere with least faltering to the body of modernised classical doctrines, to construe this struggle for wealth as being substantially a struggle for subsistence. (Veblen 24)

Recognising that consumer society was not based on subsistence-level purchases, Veblen successfully analysed the “character of a struggle between men for the possession of goods” and arrived at his theory of pecuniary emulation (24), the acquisition of leisure, and the “vicarious consumption” of the “lady” and her “domestic establishment” (68).

Although written at the end of the century, Veblen’s analysis of bourgeois consumer habits is largely applicable to Stoddard’s novel set predominantly in the 1850s, because he analysed the economic paradigm that would develop from the social change of the mid-century. He recognised the complex interrelationship between social expectation and consumer economics, and thus, economic theory began to shift from the belief in the intrasubjective demand of the *homo economicus* to an understanding of consumer and economic intersubjectivity.

The idea of intersubjectivity is the hypothesis that human consciousnesses are constitutionally interdependent, that, as unique human personalities, we form and reform ourselves, not in isolation, but rather in relation to and under the influence of other human subjects and institutions. (Fullbrook “Descartes” 403)

Cassandra and her father are the ultimate “conspicuous consumers” of Veblen’s theory. He asserts that the “motive that lies at the root of ownership is emulation”

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<sup>8</sup> Emerson writes: “The populace think that your rejection of popular standards is a rejection of all standard, and the mere antinomianism; and the bold sensualist will use the name of philosophy to gild his crimes” (193); and “[i]nsist upon yourself; never imitate” (199).

and that this emulatory process becomes an institution unto itself (25-26). "The process of wealth confers honour;" he writes, "it is an invidious distinction" (25).

Nevertheless, while Stoddard's novel actively confronts the economic paradigms Veblen models, her female characters are not a collective entity that blindly accepts the restrictions of Veblen's capitalist wife, a consumer of luxuries whose social function is to "put in evidence her household's ability to pay" (180). Furthermore, as discussed earlier in the chapter, the domestic space is not a refuge from the market economy, as the women in Stoddard's novel actually engage in a variety of economic activities.

Young Hersila Allen of Barmouth may not be "aware that the pink calico" she wears "was remotely owing to West India Rum," but Cassandra certainly knows of the hypocrisies and dangers "in the pursuit of Gain" (34), and that her father's economic successes and failures are central to the social position of the family. She wisely comments to Desmond Somers that "[m]en whose merchandise is ships are apt to die bankrupt" (191). Alice Morgeson takes over Charles's business concerns after his death, and it is her money that returns Cassandra's father to solvency when they later marry. She also observes that Cassandra's "importance in the world" will be determined by money, be it earned or inherited (101).

Indeed, with Alice's business involvement and straightforward suggestion that Cassandra might be taught "some trade" (101), we might conclude that despite her domestic idealism at Rosville, Alice is the woman in the novel most ideologically aligned with Stoddard's woman's rights movement call in the *Daily Alta California* (11 January 1857) for the "extension of the means of honorable and *honored* employment for women, and the enjoyment of property rights, and legal power to retain or dispose of property" ("Journalism" 327). Furthermore, Mrs. Somers controls her family money, and shortly before Locke Morgeson's shipping company goes bankrupt, Cassandra is horrified to learn that "half the widows, old maids, and sailors' wives in Surrey" are her father's creditors (221). They may well cry, "Pay us now, for we are women," when the company fails (231), thus implying a gendered

response to investment knowledge and responsibility, but women are certainly not removed from the “contagion” of money.<sup>9</sup>

Neither is Locke Morgeson removed from domestic involvement, as it is he who engages in the repeated cycle of purchase and replacement of domestic items. According to Cott’s study, this suggests an older economic understanding of the home than we suppose of mid-nineteenth-century New England life.

In colonial American husbands, as “providers,” typically were responsible for purchasing goods—including household goods, furniture, and food staples, if they were to be bought—but in commercial towns of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century wives more frequently became shoppers, especially for articles of dress and food. (Cott 45)

Cassandra’s father sets into action Veblen’s theory of “Pecuniary Emulation”, whereby possessions act as a measure for social esteem: “the end sought by accumulation is to rank high in comparison with the rest of the community in point of pecuniary strength” (Veblen 31).

He displays his wealth and spending power, thus becoming a benchmark for fashion in the surrounding community.

It was enough for him to know that he had built a good house to shelter us, and to order the best that could be bought for us to eat and to wear. He liked, when he went where there were fine shops, to buy and bring home handsome shawls, bonnets, and dresses, wholly unsuited in general to the style and taste of each of us, but much handsomer than were needful for Surrey. They answered, however, as patterns for the plainer materials of our neighbors. He also bought books for us, recommended by their covers, or the opinion of the bookseller. His failing was to buy an immense quantity of everything he fancied. (23)

This passage warns the reader that it is not merely “enough” for Locke to know he could provide for his family, but that his spendthrift ways would eventually lead to financial ruin during a downturn in the shipbuilding industry. There is always something else and something more to buy. Cassandra, who as a girl, rarely denied

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<sup>9</sup> In *Public Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (1984), Mary Kelley writes that “[d]ownward mobility was not an uncommon experience in the nineteenth century” (146). Of the women writers Kelley studies, “a variety of factors made their literary income necessary, important income: the sickness and death of fathers and husbands, divorce and separation, financial disaster, or simply inadequate supply of funds.” She continues that despite the rhetoric against the “publicly self-supporting” woman, women writers’ responses to their husbands’ economic difficulties were representative of widespread economic instability (145-46).

herself anything, takes on her father's consumerism, but like all the women in this family, individual response subverts any possibility of them becoming what Veblen would class as "chief ornament[s]" of Locke's economic success.

Into this problematic economic nexus, Caroline Foley's "Fashion" offers some sense and a unifying theory for the consumer (and musical) world Stoddard depicts. Her "anodyne title," deliberately evokes the feminine sphere of the late-nineteenth-century "New Woman", and as Edward Fullbrook observes, "concealed a cache of sharp-edged and deeply subversive insights" ("Foley" 709). Like Veblen, Foley was principally discussing the economic climate of the 1890s, but her early appraisal of fashion as a vital feature of economics opens up the possibility of analysing the consumerism in Stoddard's portrayal of feminine subjectivity and domestic activity.

One of the few commentators to take Foley's study seriously, Fullbrook in his 1997 article "Caroline Foley and the Theory of Intersubjective Demand," attempts to give her "the position in the history of economic thought that she earned" (Fullbrook 710), specifically her focus on "the residuum of variableness in wants" (Foley 461) and her reluctance to "identify equilibrium with optimization" (Fullbrook 712). From an economic standpoint, it was only in the 1890s that economists were "coming to terms with post-subsistence level market phenomena, and the "ever-growing dependence of consumer demands on interpersonal factors" (Fullbrook 709-10). Fullbrook views "Fashion" as an early attempt to systematise the structure of fashion and consumer activity within that space as a "result of intersubjective determination" (715).

Thus fashion is not determined by the intrasubjective demand of neoclassical theory, the two way supply and demand model, but rather a nexus of complex economic requirements. Fullbrook refines this into five motives leading to intersubjective demand: "the taste for change, the love of distinction, the propensity to imitate, conformity, and the expression of social consciousness" (714). Foley's acknowledgement of an intersubjective response to fashion and consumerism provides a vital framework for analysing Cassandra's individualist approach to a conventional life. As I will discuss in more detail below, if the individual can be controlled by market forces and simultaneously express individualist choice through



consumerism, then that great nineteenth-century consumer object, the piano, must also be governed by the same socio-economic framework. The domestic piano was for many nineteenth-century consumers, first and foremost, an object of fashion.

Foley's article is perhaps the first serious analysis of fashion as a dynamic of the economy, though Veblen claims his own 1899 study as the first of its type. Up until this time economic theories defined "taste" as the respectable subject of classical and masculine aesthetic theory, but aligned "fashion" with the feminine and frivolous. It is therefore little wonder that a theory of fashion by a female economist still only in her twenties went largely unnoticed by her peers:

No explanation at all satisfying has hitherto been offered of the phenomenon of changing fashions. The imperative requirement of dressing in the latest accredited manner, as well as the fact that this accredited fashion constantly changes from season to season, is sufficiently familiar to everyone, but the theory of this flux and change has not been worked out. (Veblen 172)

Central to Foley's analysis is an attempt to raise discussion of fashion and consumerism from "a mere matter of bonnets" (Foley 460). Fashion was a part of the consumer economy that most theorists by-passed due to its erratic and seemingly irrational characteristics. The consumer's complex relationship with fashion meant that it was related to, but not the same as, social custom or practice; neither was it easily applicable to principles of taste and aesthetics.

It may not be wholly superfluous to distinguish fashion forthwith from custom, usage or taste. Tastes whether concerned with the what or the how of our wants, convey more or less the implication of an aesthetically sufficient reason: custom or usage may be based on comfort or morality. But when anything is wanted on the ground that is fashionable a rational basis seems farther to seek. (460)

Although Foley noted that the "study of the consumer" had become "more disinterested and genuine than it was in the past," (458) fashion as a feature of consumerism was considered by economists to have little influence on the wider market, and more damning perhaps, dominated by the consumer interests of women. Indeed, as Foley quotes, "Thorold Rogers only alluded [in *Industrial and Commercial History of England*] to the 'unintelligible fickleness' of fashion to groan and pass by" (459). Fashion was perceived as a purely feminine phenomenon, and therefore judged alongside the domestic sphere as "unsystematized, inefficient, nonurgent" (Cott 61). Foley, on the other hand, saw this "more or less incessant

tendency to change" (460) as the essential character of the phenomenon of fashion, and her theory focuses on the "residuum of variableness of wants" not yet accounted in economics (461).

Veblen too relegates fashion to the irrational and the frivolous, and although he touches upon the important social discourse of the 1890s that women's fashion was physically and socially restrictive, he gives little acknowledgement of the wider connotations of fashion beyond dress and ornamentation. Fashion, or "Dress as an Expression of the Pecuniary Culture" (167-87) is but one element of his study, but he fails to create a convincing argument primarily because of his intrinsic antagonism towards the aesthetics of dress. Veblen's personal belief that the aesthetic beauty of fashion was in a state of decline overwhelms any true analysis of fashion as a feature of economics (175).

According to Fullbrook, "Veblen's consumer universe is absurd" (723), and this is because he fails to allow for any subjective awareness in the consumer. Andrew Hook also comments that the "theoretical and conceptual" style of Veblen's prose was enough to make most contemporary readers believe he was writing about someone other than themselves (183). Indeed, his argument that "the assertion freely goes uncontradicted that styles in vogue two thousand years ago are more becoming than the most elaborate and painstaking constructions of to-day" (174-5) is speculation bordering on the ridiculous. His clear dislike, even if it is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, of late-nineteenth-century dress dominates his theory, and buries the many astute arguments about fashion as a category of conspicuous consumerism.

Foley, however, approached fashion from a non-gender-specific position, shifting the ground of debate from a matter of aesthetics to economics. Specifically in *The Morgesons*, Veblen's "keeping up with the Joneses" consumer world only directly relates to the fourteen-year-old Cassandra and her emulation of her classmates at Miss Black's school in Barmouth. She insists on having a pink calico dress, because "it is the fashion" (39). However, pecuniary emulation comes at a price; she receives the censure rather than the praise of her classmates, who spitefully refuse to wear their own pink calicoes. Despite this, Cassandra still wears her French slippers to school throughout the winter, stubbornly suffering her chilblains (46). These are unquestionably the consumer demands of a teenage girl wishing to fit it

with a new community, and do not address the complex nature of capitalist consumerism, nor indeed the inherent problems of conspicuous consumerism.

Foley viewed the rising affluence of western society as an important influence on the structure of fashion and consumerism. Affluence liberated the consumer from “the bonds of custom by creating fresh needs or modes of needs” (463). All goods are on some level luxury purchases, with pure water and air as the only exceptions, and commodities function in a variety of modes (462). She thus transforms the marketplace of the fashionable to include all members of society.

[...] the working man has been for some time asserting that he is not a machine, but has tastes and likes to be in the fashion, even though fashion may turn and rend him as it abandons his employer’s business. He too is a consumer, “temperate,” it may be, yet apt “to gase and to buy somewhat,” and influence the fluctuations in demand. There is no further excuse for neglecting a thorough-going examination of those fluctuations. (459)

Foley promoted a radical reform in demand theory by expanding her interests beyond luxury goods and the purchasing practices of the elite. “Mobility and fancy” had changed consumer demand so that economic “principles, once governing the production of articles of luxury only, apply now to the majority of forms and many of the materials in supply” (469).

Furthermore, she avoids active discussion of the role of women in the economy, beyond observations of 1890s change in feminine dress and the increase in women’s participation in industry, but, as Fullbrook notes, her use of the title “Fashion” evokes “images of genteel femininity” (711). This deliberately subverts traditional interpretations of fashion as irrational and makes it an economic concept that includes gentlemen, the “autonomous consumer with stable wants” (Fullbrook 711) and also the working classes. They were bound by the same irrationality of fashion trends as their wives and daughters, thereby dismantling any the notion of an economic domestic sphere separate from industry and business.

Fashion was liberated from the social principles of custom and taste, but its own principles could be applied to seemingly rational social habits, “so that it may become equally fashionable to frequent evangelical meetings as to buy Irish laces” (468). This relationship between social habit and purchase demand immediately resonates with Cassandra’s abhorrence of the seasonal religious revivals in her

community, despite her social need as a teenager to attend Bible Class (54), and her guilt over buying “a dozen yards of lace,” because she subsequently “saw other articles [she] wanted more” (66). Furthermore, Foley’s attempts to analyse aesthetic choice according to economic principles also addressed the wider economic implications of consumer choice.

Viewed in its effects upon expenditure, fashion, by increasing some values and lowering others, has been held as self-equating with respect to the national budget, [...]. (Foley 468)

Thus, even the ostensibly frivolous act of purchasing a “better” hat than that of your neighbour can have repercussions on the textile industry of a particular region, provided enough consumers are moved as individuals to make similar purchasing choices. In the wider economic climate, consumer choice is part of the system that controls growth and downturn in the industrial market.

Just as social consciousness and women’s employment effected a change in the fashionable dress, Foley believed that the consumer could reflect social consciousness in their purchasing choices. For it may have been just as fashionable to purchase a copy of *The American Woman’s Home* and adhere to a belief in a feminine domestic sphere, as it would have been to wear Amelia Bloomer’s pantaloons in support of woman’s suffrage.<sup>10</sup> For Foley and the high capitalist framework she analyses, that the participants of such social ideologies may also be engaged in the fashion dynamic of consumer demand neither negates nor undermines their social position.

Women in Stoddard’s works are neither “angel guardians of the sacred hearthstone” (Evans 140) nor free-thinking radicals, and if they remind us of such stereotypes, the author refuses to conform to a single notion about what womanhood ought to be. Stoddard reinforced this ideology in her short story of 1870 “Collected by a Valetudinarian.” On reading Alicia Raymond’s writing, Julia Beaufort remarks, “how dare you tell the truth about us women?” (306). The “truth” is an acceptance of multiplicities and there is no easy divide between the domestic sphere and the

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<sup>10</sup> Nicole Tonkovich writes in the Introduction to *The American Woman’s Home*, that the 1869 updated version of Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1841) “may have been as eagerly anticipation by Beecher admirers as was the 1997 edition of *The Joy of Cooking* (x); Amelia Bloomer wrote after six years of wearing her pantaloons, “In the minds of some people, the short dress and woman’s rights were inseparably connected. With us, the dress was but an incident, and we were not willing to sacrifice greater questions to it” (Bloomer 62).

industrial, economic world in Foley's theory. Reading *The Morgesons* within this economic framework reiterates Zagarell's claim that for Stoddard "'life' is not gendered: it *is*" ("Strenuous Artistry" 295). It also resonates with Margaret Fuller's theory that "[t]here is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman" (*Woman* 69), and therefore implies a different understanding of domestic conventionality.

We must treat the piano in *The Morgesons* as an economic, domestic, and feminine object, which is subverted by Stoddard only insofar as the individual character determines. The nineteenth-century concept of the piano girl is directly related to "Foley's version of *homo economicus*," which Fullbrook describes as "an open reflective system, evolving with the changes it effects on its environment" (713). Furthermore, if we consider Ruth Solie's theory of the piano girl, the performance of girlhood must include intersubjective understanding of the performative act.

On the one hand, girling is the social process that forms girls appropriate to the needs of the society they live in; on the other, it is their own enactment—or, in Butlerian terms, the performance—of girlhood, both to satisfy familial and social demands on them, and as we shall see, to satisfy needs of their own either to resist those demands or to reassure themselves about their own capacity to fulfill them. (Solie 86)

Therefore, Foley's theory provides a means of approaching the individualist and social role of Stoddard's piano and piano girls in both consumer and Romantic terms.

Proclaiming the piano as a consumer object does not render it a signifier of the purely material; its cultural and practical significance is obviously far more complex, and Cassandra effectively pre-empts Madame Merle's "great respect for *things*!" in *The Portrait of a Lady* (175). Signs and objects can be manipulated, and in the intersubjective world of the Morgesons' piano, the individual's response to those signs must be predicated upon an acceptance that "no one commodity" or no one sign, "admits of being produced in one *mode* only" (462). The piano conforms entirely to received notions of femininity and domesticity, yet like the wider framework of nineteenth-century consumerism, this does not tie the women who play it to a singular objective response to the instrument or mode of musical



performance—for it was as fashionable to attend religious revivals as it was to buy Irish laces as it was to play the piano.

As I established earlier in the chapter, Veronica's impervious selfhood is enacted deliberately through a housebound and invalid state. She is ostensibly the ideal of domestic womanhood—even her future husband misreads her as a “delicate, pure, ignorant soul” (226)—but Stoddard subverts this convention by trapping Veronica's wild, unreadable character in misplaced piety. Food becomes central to her sphere of control, as a teenager she comments that, “eating toast does not make me better-tempered; I feel evil still” (52). Feeding upon her interiority, Veronica is “educated by sickness; her mind fed and grew on pain, and at last mastered it” (59).

It is important to acknowledge the diagnostic interest in Veronica's “long and mysterious illnesses” (13), and indirectly, what may be the source of her musical talent—one critic positing Asperger's Syndrome as a possible diagnosis (Stern 115). There is an obvious undercurrent in *The Morgesons* of the age-old concern that genius is born of madness, but we can also read an important relationship between the body and musical expression, particularly as the performance of music is a physical act and requires a dedicated control over the body.

Ryan, in particular, writes with great authority on the socio-historic role of starvation and appetite in the moral education of young women in the nineteenth century. She quotes one American physician, Orson Fowler, who in 1851 “cautioned young women against masturbation” and admonished them “to refrain from taking almost any food whatsoever” (129).

“As to suppers,” he wrote in 1851, “I recommend *none at all*. A full stomach induces dreams, or the exercise, in sleep, of those organs most liable to spontaneous action which in this case is Amativeness...Never fear starvation.” (Ryan 129)

Well before the advent of psychoanalysis, “Edmond de Goncourt saw a connection between playing the piano and masturbation” (Corbin 533), and music can be added to Ryan's argument that the acts of self-starvation and autoeroticism “are shot through with similar ideas: the exertion of control over the individual body; the consumption of the self; the management and exacerbation of excess; the enclosure of the self into an impenetrable realm of self-sufficiency” (129).

This physicality of music has parallels with Augusta Evans's characterisation of Beulah Benton. In her study of the reading mind and body in *Beulah*, Suzanne M. Ashworth addresses the importance of physiognomic and phrenological understandings of the body and mind in the nineteenth century.

Within Victorian medical lore, the body was an immutable sign and site of individual character—a fixed index of the soul. Physiognomy, pathology, and phrenology taught that one could gauge interior reality by its outward manifestations be they the form and colours of the face, passing facial expressions, or the shape of the head. (81)

Beulah's musicianship and her reading are viewed by Ashworth to be positive psychosomatic acts. "Beulah shows us that the body could be enlisted in the formation and representation of an ideal reading subject" (Ashworth 86).

From this critical position of Beulah as an ideal reader, Ashworth looks at Beulah's response to the "Psalm of Life" by Longfellow: "Inspired by this fellowship with the book and the natural world, Beulah sings the "Psalm of Life" as if it were a hymn, "[h]er soul echoed the sentiments of the immortal bard [...]" (14). Beulah's response of singing the text is physical and morally representative: "Beulah's responsive song is part and parcel of her ability to harness the strength-giving power of celestial love. Put simply, her fully embodied reaction to the text fuels and foment an exemplary state of being" (Ashworth 90). Her natural musicality, whether she plays or receives music, can only be the product of divine influence.

Images of divine beauty filled her soul, and nobler aspirations than she had ever known, took possession of her. [...] It was the look of one whose spirit, escaping from gross bondage, soared into realms divine, and proclaimed itself God-born" (75).

If music as a physical response is morally representative of the self, then Veronica is not so steadfast. Her piano playing does not inspire others to do or be the same. Her life, her music is not exemplary. It fluctuates, "chaotic, but not tumultuous, beautiful, but inharmonious" (*Morgesons* 53).

In fact, Veronica is very reluctant to perform for anyone. Requests to "go and play on the piano" are often denied, or dismissed with pettish replies like "I was going" in any attempt to exert her will (53). Cassandra even has to manage Veronica's courtship with Ben Somers, and literally takes her sister's place at the piano to sing the song that is the catalyst for the couple's engagement.

He dropped the window curtains and sat beside me at the piano, and I sang:  
[...]  
If I were alone, I could not sing,  
Praises to thee;  
Oh night! Unveil the beautiful soul  
That awaiteth me!

“A foolish song,” Veronica may well say (158), but Cassandra successfully fulfils the musical exchange of courtship on her behalf. However, this go-between role is unworkable in their marriage, and Veronica’s avoidance of adult responsibility necessitated by changing circumstances results in her inability to help Ben with his alcoholism. “Veronica will probably not understand you,” Cassandra warns Ben, “but you must manage for yourself” (160).

Veronica’s marriage to Ben marks not the end of her piano-playing per se, but the end of her subjective “quest of something beyond” the physical fabric of existence (252). She does not give up her individualistic music because of some fulfilment of womanhood brought about by marriage, but rather, her self-constructed identity cannot maintain itself as a sexually aware woman. Her performance of sexual womanhood in a misguided marriage stifles her Romantic sense of musicality, because it is associated with domestic self-denial and repressed sexual desire. In the end, her interiority crumbles upon her marriage to Ben, her appetite returns, and her talent becomes benign and sterile, like their baby, who “smiles continually, but never cries, never moves, except when it is moved” (252).

The lack of didacticism in *The Morgesons* makes it difficult to draw easy conclusions about physical acts and the domestic imperatives set out in sentimental fiction. Veronica’s musical fall cannot and should not be mistaken for the contemporary dislike of the impracticality of feminine accomplishments. Augusta Evans’s Salomé loses her voice as a punishment for the “vanity” of pursuing an opera career in Paris (*Vashti* 292), but *The Morgesons* is not concerned with the morality of feminine musicianship in the public sphere, as neither Veronica nor Cassandra have any inclination to perform professionally. In this instance, not playing for society becomes dangerous to Veronica’s physical health.

Consequently, the influence of music is far more complex than merely the insidious desire to “expose” oneself publicly, and Veronica’s excessive musicianship

can be read as a very subversive reduction of Emerson's "Self-reliance." She is inflexibly self-reliant in music, but this does not extend to her life, and consequently, her social and sexual development is stunted. In terms of Foley's economic intersubjectivity, *The Morgesons* suggests that had Veronica been a little more interested in the fickleness of fashion and a little less serious about her domestic ideals of privateness, her music might have been less onanistic.

Nevertheless, music is one of the few means by which the Morgesons, a family that struggles with mutual sympathy, may interpret the "elfish" Veronica and themselves (13), and if we must find a didactic principle in Stoddard's novel, it can only be that you have to live in the world, and you have responsibilities within that world. Those responsibilities extend to consumption and sexuality. "What makes Stoddard's novel different," writes Harris "is its honest portrayal of women's sexuality, and its insistency that among women's many responsibilities, responsibility for their sexual lives had to be confronted and accepted" (17).

For Mr. Somers, Veronica's genius is a "deplorable thing for a woman" (242). However, the deplorable thing for Cassandra is not Veronica's character per se, but that it is entirely bound up with renunciation and dependence, and on her marriage to Ben, Cassandra witnesses her sister's musical farewell to maidenhood and genius.

It was not a paeon nor a lament that she played, but a fluctuating, vibratory air, expressive of mutation. I hung over the stair-railing after she ceased, convinced that she had been playing for herself a farewell, which freed me from my bond to her (242).

In the commerce of feminine accomplishments and the marriage market, Veronica takes no responsibility for her sexual and adult life. She "will be a child always," Cassandra tells her school friend Helen, "You advance by experience" (150).

It is very significant that Cassandra develops her musical skills at Rosville when she is under the care and sexual gaze of her distant cousin Charles Morgeson. His home and family are paragons of domestic and financial order. Charles owns and runs a cotton mill, and his wife, Alice, is popular and has "a talent for housekeeping" (76). "Nobody in Rosville lived at so fast a rate as the Morgesons" (77), although Charles's "heart is with his horses and his flowers" (76). In economic terms secular Rosville is actually a congenial place for Cassandra, as Troy discusses:

[...] new money is generally not sneered at in this middle-class haven. Consequently, Cassandra finds friends, receives social appreciation, and achieves some (upper-) middle-class accomplishments and virtues: she learns how to sing, how to dress to her advantage, and how to see beauty in order. (Troy 121)

Cassandra is domesticated by Charles; “she internalizes standards of femininity both because of her unarticulated feelings for the married owner of the cottage, and because of the orderly domestic example set by his exemplary wife” (Troy 117). In this environment, the piano and music are performative obligations of any would-be bride, thus making Cassandra a prime specimen like the horses Charles buys, sells and tames. So much so that Alice’s cousin, Bill, admiringly thinks Cassandra “a whole team and a horse to let” (166). His admiration of Cassandra, her potential accomplishments, and Charles’s horses are intermingled: “He has prime horses anyhow. That stallion of his would bring a first-rate price if he wanted to sell. Do you play the piano?” (117). Twenty years before Henry James’s depiction in *The Portrait of a Lady* of Gilbert Osmond’s attempts to make Isabel Archer the “prize specimen” in his collection of art and antiques, Stoddard condemns Charles for grooming Cassandra into an object for the socio-sexual market of marriage; a commodity to be bought and sold like one of his horses.

But Cassandra is no commodity, partly because Charles intends to transgress market rules and have her for himself, but more importantly, because Cassandra refuses to participate in such a one-way demand economy. Returning to her music, with the exception of her lesson with Mrs. Lane, Cassandra does not actually play or sing in the narrative at Rosville; she is only known for her singing. It is a feature of her role as an accomplished young woman, but not of her agency as an individual. Cassandra is educated by Charles to be a commodity of the domestic sphere, and to sacrifice herself to his needs, ironically undermining her suitability for the marriage market, but ultimately, Cassandra refuses to be tamed.

Their unconsummated relationship is the subject of much scholarly attention, because of Stoddard’s “unequivocal endorsement of the sexual woman” (Weir 433). Cassandra is “neither a fallen woman nor a virtuous heroine” explains Lynn Mahoney (42), because, unique for its time, Cassandra’s recognition of sexual attraction does not warrant guilt. Stoddard is explicit that experience shapes an individual’s understanding of life and self, and Lawrence Buell cites Stoddard’s own



interest in the way Charlotte Brontë portrayed Jane Eyre's interactions with Mr. Rochester as evidence for her championing of sexual awareness.

“What do you think of those scenes in *Jane Eyre*,” Stoddard once asked James Russell Lowell, “where she watches with a professional eye the rising of [Rochester's] passionate emotions and skilfully prevents any culmination of feeling by changing her manner?” (Buell 361).

Buell describes Cassandra as the “half-ingenuous, half-deliberate provoker of the emotions from whose intensity she backs away into reserve” (361), but without undermining her agency in the affair, I find this reading too sympathetic with Charles's actions. Like her accomplishment-based education at Rosville, her relationship with Charles is part of the currency of a specific mode of domesticity and courtship that is ultimately incompatible with Cassandra's individualism, because it is determined by others. “Cassandra is never tempted,” Charles observes, “What she does, she does because she will” (98). But why should we take Charles's opinion of her? Firstly, he is no Rochester, and more importantly, such a statement is equivalent to a “she was asking for it” avoidance of personal responsibility. This is a man who whips employees and “diabolical” horses alike, and Cassandra's father is in no doubt of his sexual cunning (245).

When Charles drums the piano in Cassandra's presence, his violence symbolically extends to her (81). This is reminiscent of Cassandra banging the keys before relinquishing the piano to Veronica, but here it implies ownership over Cassandra and her world, whipping her piano as he would a horse. She is “strangely bound to him” (123), but the events of the carriage accident that kills Charles and scars Cassandra both physically and emotionally, do not detract from the fact that she never allows herself to be taken in by the intensity of Charles's emotions and control. Aside from the author killing him off before the relationship can be consummated, there are other clues to Charles's misunderstanding of Cassandra. Mercy thinks she is possessed; Charles believes she is willing everything. Stoddard, however, quite simply scoffs at the idea their fears and desires can be justified by a belief in Cassandra's complicity. The “characterless woman” refuses to conform to these arbitrary associations. Cassandra *is* tempted, but it is her will that holds her back.

Here it is appropriate to look to *Jane Eyre* and Rochester's realisation of Jane: “Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature!

If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose" (Brontë 318). Stoddard is clearly intending a sense of self, a strength of will in Cassandra, reminiscent of Jane, and demanding such intersubjective understanding in any would-be husband. Desmond, for all his youthful dissipation, is clearly Stoddard's spokesperson on the subject of love affairs, for he recognises that "women like [Cassandra], pure, with no vice of blood, sometimes are tempted, struggle, and suffer" (183).<sup>11</sup> He too loved "shamelessly," but "if there was ruin, it was mutual," and the girl in question is no outcast in Belem society (199). As the man who marries Cassandra, we might safely conclude that Stoddard favours his observation of the heroine. Charles is a struggle for Cassandra, but his attempts at domestic taming—the flowers, rings, the music lessons, and household order—are trappings of a sexual performativity of which Cassandra is only too aware.

Returning to Foley's theory of fashion, defined by Fullbrook as "an open reflective system, evolving with the changes it effects on its environment" (713), we must recognise a distinct difference between Cassandra's relationships in Rosville and Belem, not merely because of the contrast between new money and old families, but because of Cassandra and Desmond's intersubjective and mutual performance of music. The Somers's home in Belem, with its cluttered wealth and family antagonism, is where Cassandra's songs are most significant in the narrative. Music links her with Desmond, not because like so many couples in nineteenth-century novels they fall in love through the convention of the piano and parlour songs, but because he listens to her properly.

When Cassandra satisfies Adelaide Somer's indifferent request for a song, she rather pointedly sing "Drink to me only with thine eyes" in a household blighted by inherited alcoholism (174). Desmond may later be heard at piano singing "Fill, fill the sparkling brimmer" with his old college friends (197), but Cassandra's repertoire choice does prove to be prophetic. For here the Byronic Desmond joins in with Cassandra's song "[w]ith a perfectly pure voice," and the domestic setting is transformed by Cassandra's trope of the fluctuating sea.

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<sup>11</sup> This line is reminiscent of Miriam's description of the Beatrice Cenci portrait in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*: "She is a fallen angel, fallen, and yet sinless; and it is only this depth of sorrow, with its weight and darkness, that keeps her down upon earth, and brings her within our view even while it sets her beyond our reach" (53).

As the tones of his voice floated through the room, I was where I saw the white sea-birds flashing between the blue deeps of our summer sea and sky, and the dark rocks that rose and dipped in the murmuring waves. (174)

Troy suggests that this imagery shows that “the strength of feelings between her and Desmond is better framed by “the wild sea and shores of Surrey” than by genteel Belem (129), but the juxtaposition of domestic convention and stormy Romanticism is appropriate for a description of the man himself. Byronic yes,—“a violent, tyrannical, sensual man”—but on facts alone, Ben must admit to describing his brother as “handsome, clever, resolute, sings well” (226). Furthermore, the link between love, domestic music and the sea is reinforced at the conclusion of the novel. When Desmond unexpectedly returns from Spain, Cassandra is just about to calm her “mad regret and frantic longing” by singing through the parlour song “Mount on the dolphin Pleasure” (250). The song is of course forgotten when Cassandra sees Desmond, but this scene repeats the novel’s consistent refusal to separate even the most powerful Romantic expressions from the realities of everyday life. In Foley’s words we might succinctly describe the role of our “characterless” piano in this nexus of domesticity, romanticism, and courtship: “the love of variety and its social liabilities [...] finds even in necessities its opportunity [...] (462).

Many modern critics have struggled with the sentimental conclusion of *The Morgesons*. Cassandra takes responsibility and possession of the family home, then, after two years of resigned but silently hopeful waiting, marries the supposedly reformed alcoholic Desmond. That Cassandra “gives herself up” to her familial role (215), but does not resign herself to a higher authority of ordained domesticity is unique. The “prosaic domain” of domesticity does not divide Cassandra from any dream of an autonomous economic or public lifestyle, but it does temporarily divide her from her dreams of Desmond (216). James H. Matlock saw the “predictable implausibility of the happy marriage” as a convention to tidy up the novel for a sentimental audience (293). However, it is only plausible in the context of the novel because of Cassandra and Desmond’s shared accountability for past actions and future responsibilities. Unlike Charles, Desmond wants to come to Cassandra unencumbered by his faults. “Will you trust me?” he asks of her (250). As Harris says, in the tradition of *Jane Eyre*, “her man is her equal not her master” (19).

In an act of self-determinism related to Cassandra's acceptance of domestic responsibility, Desmond refuses to adhere to his family's belief that their alcoholism is incurable, so spends two abstinent years in Spain eating "an immense quantity of oil and garlic" to rid himself of the disease (250). "Men, as well as young women," Mahoney discusses of Stoddard's works, "suffer from confining ideology of gender and familial roles" (91). In a narrative development of absolute Romantic idealism, Cassandra meets a man who not only listens to her, but who sings with her. They "comprehend each other without collision." Furthermore, she "loves him, as a mature woman may love," which, for this novel at least, can happen "only once" (226). Ben's self-destructive alcoholic end may conclude the novel, and we are left in the knowledge that Desmond lives on the edge of that same abyss, but even alcoholism is treated by Stoddard as "simply a part of life" (Zagarell 294). It may be a "mad world of disintegrating families, fluctuating fortunes, and self-destructive personalities" (Harris 21), but life continues.

Cassandra is one of the great consumers of nineteenth-century American fiction, and she must therefore be read with an understanding of the fluctuations and inconsistencies of fashion. Foley's theory opens the possibility to align Cassandra's consumerism with a Romantic uncertainty in "the existence of quantifiable truths" and a belief in "the primacy of individual experience" (Mahoney 153). The piano, at once commodity and musical instrument, relates well to this most original character of Cassandra. Despite the overwhelming convention of her musicianship, it does not define her as conventional or domestic. Cassandra only ever "gives herself up" temporarily—the sea and her senses wait (215)—and I have found little mention in recent criticism to the life she leads with Desmond after their marriage; the life Cassandra hopes for on the sea shore at Surrey where she will have "[i]ts roar, its beauty, its madness [...] *all*" (215).

Troy may be right in asserting that Surrey frames Cassandra and Desmond's love better than Belem, but they do return there, despite the mixed indifference and disapproval of the Somers family. Marriage opens up for Cassandra a world of European tours and genteel life, and raises questions about how she will interact with European expectations. Will Cassandra like Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* tragically misunderstand the ways of "thoroughly Europeanised Americans" (Taylor,

*Henry James* 33) or will she maintain her ability to individually use the signs of society and status? While it will not do to make Cassandra a prototype for Madame Merle, she is certainly not the “free keen girl” embodied in Isabel who believes wholeheartedly in the essential self (*Portrait* 444). Stoddard assures the reader that Cassandra has “no vice of blood,” but it is clear that she accepts a fluidity and flexibility of selfhood that continues into married life.

Cassandra is self-reliant, but unlike Emerson’s concept of the wave, she refuses to be a static particle in society; she moves with it and sometimes even against it. She is the “characterless woman” of Oakes Smith’s theory and her adult decisions are governed by a spontaneous response to the contingent reality of all that life might have to offer. However, it would be trite indeed to say that the fashionable woman is the “characterless” woman, because Cassandra’s characterlessness is determined by her actions, not the specific signs she chooses to manipulate. Just as her previous acceptance of domestic responsibility is the inauguration of “what would seem to be a new cycle—not a new era” (Buell 358), her marriage does not compromise her individualism. Unlike for Veronica, marriage is just part of life and it will not silence Cassandra’s voice or her piano.





## Chapter 4

### An American *jeune fille* at the piano: Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*

"An American *jeune fille*—what could be better than that?" This is the question Edward Rosier asks himself as he watches the nineteen-year-old Pansy Osmond make tea. She is, in Rosier's besotted appreciation, "delightfully old-fashioned" and "[h]e was sure Pansy had never looked at a newspaper and that, in the way of novels, if she had read Sir Walter Scott it was the very most." Her nationality only made her more perfect—"a *jeune fille* who should yet not be French, for he had felt that this nationality would complicate the question" (420).<sup>1</sup>

Pansy, who was born and raised in Europe under her father's strict control, is however, less a product of her American heritage than her father's reaction against that heritage. Ruth Solie argues that the piano-playing daughter signifies more about the father and his domestic situation than it does about the girl (95), and it is interesting to note that Pansy's piano-playing does not appear to be relevant in Rosier's assessment of her perfection. In the complex myth of nineteenth-century femininity and music, Pansy is not only a troubling version of the ideal daughter, but also of the piano girl. Henry James has created a character so outwardly simplistic in her obedience to her father and his very narrow set of rules about what a daughter ought to be, that, to quote Robert Pippin, "[i]n some grotesque imitation of European manners, she has been made fit for nothing, but pouring tea" (129).

In Pansy's prison of daughterhood—concluding in the novel with her actual confinement in a convent—the piano figures significantly: "'Oh yes, I obey very well,' cried Pansy with soft eagerness, almost with boastfulness, as if she had been speaking of her piano-playing" (286). Nevertheless, the dominant stock image in Victorian literature of the dutiful daughter pianist is overshadowed in *The Portrait of a Lady* by the presence of Madame Merle playing Schubert in the drawing room at Gardencourt. Critics like Laura F. Hodges may alert us to the fact that in 1881, Merle played Beethoven, but by the 1908 New York Edition, James had revised her

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, I quote from the 2003 Penguin edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* (ed. Geoffrey Moore), which uses James's 1908 text.

repertoire to the more domestic and intimate “something of Schubert’s” (225).<sup>2</sup> However, Merle’s apparent uniqueness has meant that most studies of the novel barely acknowledge the wider significance of the piano: Isabel plays; Mrs. Touchett “never touched the instrument;” Ralph “play[s] for his own amusement” (224); and, of course, Pansy, being a “perfect *jeune fille*,” plays as well. Furthermore, critics and readers alike have not made the cultural or narrative connection between Merle’s apparent musical skill and her unacknowledged daughter Pansy, who practices several hours a day, but has no facility beyond “strumming at the piano” (365).

Repertoire may in fact hold the key to this link, because, as Lawrence Kramer suggests, “works of music have discursive meaning” and their meanings are part of the “continuous production and reproduction of culture” (*Cultural Practice* 1). In this chapter I wish to propose how the music of Franz Schubert confirms the conditions of musicianship in James’s very specific Euro-American culture, and how the Romantic implications of the music are irreducible from domestic intent and expectation. Just as Gilbert Osmond proclaims to Isabel Archer, “No, I’m not conventional, I’m convention itself” (362), the piano is convention itself. It is a metonym for Isabel, Madame Merle and Pansy’s collective powerlessness to control the conditions of Osmond’s conventions, and an indictment on the institution of the piano girl. Wherever the piano appears, it signifies a feminine world in keeping with the convention of the nineteenth-century piano, but this is also a confined world of deception, secrets, illness, marital oppression, and convents.

Following F. R. Leavis’s suggestion that *The Portrait of a Lady* is James’s response to *Daniel Deronda* (85),<sup>3</sup> we might turn on its head the commonly-held critical position in George Eliot scholarship that music “allows unmediated access to a character’s soul [...]” (Byerly 3), and say for James, that music conceals and

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<sup>2</sup> Hodges has written a detailed study on James’s use of musical imagery, which analyses, in her own words, “the deliberateness and pervasiveness of James’s recourse to musical analogies and the way that they function in the novel” (2). For instance, her semantic analysis of James’s musical allusions includes a critique of Isabel’s name; she is quite literally a bell—*Is a bell*—resisting the imprisoning bell tower of Casper Goodwood (Hodges 4, 10, 11).

<sup>3</sup> Leon Edel also argues that *The Portrait of a Lady* was his “way of making Isabel Archer the personality he felt George Eliot should have made of Gwendolen Harleth”: “[...] She is indeed the victim of her own complacent temperament and the real determinism of the novel is psychological determinism” (*Critical Essays* 152).

selectively mediates access to a character's reality.<sup>4</sup> For a start, no one sings in the novel, which is astonishing when you consider the ubiquitous parlour songs of this period and the stock image of the singing piano girl.<sup>5</sup>

The "voiceless" piano tantalisingly suggests things unuttered and unutterable, but even within male communication, James has created a society which outwardly conceals rather than expresses itself through music: Ralph silences his illness from the outside world through the "band of music in [his] ante-room" (113); "Under the cover of music," Caspar Goodwood "managed to contain himself" (556), and conceals his desire to talk with the unhappily married Isabel at one of her "Thursday evenings;" Similarly, Osmond's protestations to Goodwood that "my wife and I do so many things together. We read, we study, we make music [...]" (555), are quite clearly falsehoods.

For the women this pattern of concealment continues. While still at the piano stool, having played for Pansy, Isabel knows she must conceal the "things in her head which she felt a strong impulse, instantly checked, to say to Pansy about her father." She believes that such a conversation will somehow corrupt "this innocent, diminutive creature" (368). Furthermore, when Lord Warburton is briefly interested in the attentions of Pansy, Isabel uses the piano and feminine accomplishments as a means of avoiding conversation: "Isabel [...] said very little to him, on purpose; she wished him to talk with her stepdaughter. She pretended to read; she even went after a little to the piano [...]" (464).

Isabel's inability 'to distinguish between people's appearances and the reality behind them' is as Sigi Jötkandt argues a "critical commonplace" in Jamesian scholarship (6), and her reception of Merle's performance at Gardencourt is an

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<sup>4</sup> It is a well-established in Eliot scholarship that the author equates musicianship with moral worth throughout her novels. See in particular Beryl Gray's *George Eliot & Music* (1989). For a musicological perspective, see Mary Burgan who writes that "[...] in *Daniel Deronda* (1874-76) [Eliot's] preoccupation with [music's] implications for the development of woman's character becomes central to the structure and meaning of the novel" (73). Byerly succinctly observes that when Klesmer pronounces Mirah "a musician" (*Daniel Deronda* 415), he is giving the "highest accolade" in Eliot's text (9).

<sup>5</sup> Voice is particularly important in Eliot's judgement of characters. See Byerly (2, 9) and Kramer, "Beyond Words & Music: An Essay on Songfulness" (*Musical Meaning* 51-67). For a discussion of the musical representation of character in *The Portrait of a Lady* see Hodges's article "Recognizing 'False Notes': Musical Rhetoric in The Portrait of a Lady."

unquestionably important scene in this regard.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, the same critical attention is not extended to how Isabel responds to Pansy's music, or indeed to the fact that Isabel plays the piano herself. The implication of the narrative is that she plays quite well, or, at least, considerably better than Pansy, and the first mention of her musicianship is in relation to Merle's own talents, and, most importantly, its role in women's domestic entertainment.

Isabel, since she had known [Merle], felt ashamed of her own facility, which she now looked upon as basely inferior; and indeed, though she had been thought rather a prodigy at home, the loss to society when, in taking her place upon the music-stool, she turned her back to the room, was usually deemed greater than the gain. (243).

The piano is but one thing in that kaleidoscope of her privileged youthful occupations like "the music of Gounod, the poetry of Robert Browning, the prose of George Eliot" (89). Sophistication and fashion are here intermingled, but unlike Elizabeth Stoddard's Cassandra Morgeson, Isabel's status guarantees that her accomplishments are judged as tasteful. Nevertheless, their sense of purpose and meaning are obscured by her undisciplined education and, most importantly, her "desire to leave the past behind her and, as she said to herself, to begin afresh" (86). Amid the countless narrative discussions in *The Portrait of a Lady* of Second Empire Furniture, bibelots, and Osmond's attempts to add Isabel to his collection of tasteful art and artefacts, the piano barely registers as an object of either economic or cultural value.

In Bourdieuan terms, it seems the piano girl has lost some of her cultural capital. Typical of her time, Isabel's musicianship is legitimate as an extension of the woman within her private sphere, but has diminishing purchase in the socio-sexual economy it purportedly represents (*Distinction* 326). The piano was so pervasive a requirement in feminine education that one suspects that Isabel would liken it to her

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Taylor writes that "Isabel's transcendentalist-like belief in her own perceptual abilities is demonstrated in her first encounter with the mysterious stranger at Gardencourt [...]" (131)," and Hodges observes, "[t]hat Isabel should so immediately engage in heroine worship speaks volumes about her naiveté in judging both character and musical performance" (7). From a musicological perspective, Scott Messing argues that "Isabel Archer's rapturous response to [Schubert] appears to be innate" (134). Nevertheless, as William G. Sayres discusses, the tendency to view Merle's actions as "diabolical machinations" undermines critical attention to her role in the novel and influence over Isabel (232). For instance, Dennis L. O'Connor argues of the Gardencourt scene that "James indicates the lady's power to enchant by noting that Isabel had only seen "her ample well-dressed" back. Like the moon itself, her power grows until it overshadows Isabel's concern for Mr. Touchett, her reliance upon Ralph's judgement, and her desired independence (30).



clothes: "My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don't express me. To begin with it's not my own choice that I wear them; they're imposed upon me by society" (253). Isabel does not play for amusement like Ralph, whose wealth frees him from the societal whys and wherefores of gendered accomplishments; she plays because ladies play the piano.

Her recognition of society's imposition on her own activities does not extend, however, to a critical assessment of how the piano might be representative of more damaging social expectations. When read through Andrew Taylor's discussion of Isabel's "highly self-conscious dedication to the spontaneous realisation of the self" and her Emersonian "assumption of a benevolent universe," the piano becomes another sign for her tendency to "aestheticise the unpleasant" (128)—"With all her love of knowledge she had a natural shrinking from raising curtains and looking into unlighted corners" (*Portrait* 251)—and Lynda S. Boren's suggestion of Isabel's "preference for the nondenotative allure of music" (*Eurydice* 43).

The unlighted corner of music is James's rather bleak picture of its role in society, embodied in Pansy, of whom Dennis L. O'Connor writes, "[t]he youngest inmate, she reveals in her plight the dimensions of the prison the other characters inhabit and confirm" (34). While I will show that the final renunciation of Pansy and her piano in the convent is not entirely extended to Isabel and Merle, she becomes the model for the piano girl in the novel. It is part of the education intended to "fit her for the world" (286), but James is clear that the piano girl cannot function within, as Taylor describes it, the "particular demands of modern social interaction" (139).

Pansy is initially thought of by Isabel as "a sheet of blank paper—the ideal *jeune fille* of foreign fiction" ready to "be covered with an edifying text" (328), and one might argue in the nineteenth-century context, that her piano-playing is utterly consistent with contemporary ideas of feminine education and performance. In the myth of the piano girl, Pansy's musicianship reflects her unmarried status: "The young lady," as Louis Pagnerre wrote in his 1885 book *De la mauvais influence du piano sur l'art musical*, "undergoes the study of the instrument in any event; she is riveted to it until marriage" (qtd. in Loesser 414). The Victorian girl played because a young lady must be accomplished, especially a young lady like Pansy who lacks the marital allurements of a substantial dowry.

The reward for the obedient daughter—the piano-playing daughter—is, of course, a good marriage, but Pansy is denied her right to choose Edward Rosier. She literally puts into words the concluding attitude of her father on the subject of any future marriage: “If he were not my papa I should like to marry him; I would rather be his daughter than the wife of—of some strange person” (367).<sup>7</sup> Pansy’s life is a catalogue of Osmond’s superficial adherence to aesthetic ideals, embodied musically in the “idea that [she] should hear good music” (367-68), but with no expectation that she should play good music. She is a gross parody of the ideal daughter, a “Dresden-china Shepherdess” (409), with stunted development both physically and emotionally, and no tangible will of her own. Accordingly, her piano-playing never develops beyond hammering away at scales for three hours a day.

Denied sexuality and adult subjectivity, Pansy is raised according to the French convent model of “preserving girls in a state of ignorance” (Bilston 220) and is permanently ensconced in that “Awkward Age” James would later develop in his characters Nanda Brookenham and Little Aggie. While Nanda has been raised with the social freedoms many girls sought in the 1890s—“there was never a time when [she] didn’t know *something* or other [...]” (355)—she ultimately rejects the form and values of her upbringing. The sheltered Aggie, on the other hand, suffers from her education reminiscent of Pansy’s with its “cluster of doting nuns, cloistered daughters of ancient houses and educators of similar products” (63).

James grapples with the social “strain” and “complication” of an unmarried girl who is “[o]ut of the school-room” but still “[a]t her mother’s fireside” (*Awkward* 16). As one contemporary commentator wrote, a mother often expected her “grown-up daughter to be ignorant of everything objectionable upon the earth until she marries, but then she may be told anything without other preparation than the marriage service” (Grand 708). This sudden acquisition of carnal knowledge results in Aggie’s dissolute behaviour after marriage, and James’s ultimate championing of the “dreadfully damaged” Nanda (57).

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<sup>7</sup> The potentially incestuous nature of Osmond’s control over his daughter is part of a recognised theme in James’s fiction. From his first novel *Watch and Ward* (1871), “the bonds between children and their guardians remained a pregnant theme for him” (Mendelssohn 1). “Osmond’s concern for Pansy,” as Kristin Sanner observes, often “extends beyond the socially acceptable boundaries of father and daughter [...]” (156).

Contrived innocence is clearly dangerous in James's consideration of girlhood and the economic exchange of Victorian marriage, and Michèle Mendelssohn argues that "[t]he novels' clashes between the ornamental and the human are played out in the treatment of these girls" (17).<sup>8</sup> The ornamental significance of the piano is obvious, but the system of exchange it represents is unattainable for Pansy. Placing the piano in the context of the "edifying text" of marriage reinforces its unnaturalness, because while music in *The Portrait of a Lady* is deeply feminine (or in the case of Ralph's musicianship, anti-masculine), it is a social practice riveted to the women who have only limited subjective control. Mendelssohn proposes "that the Victorians saw marriage and prostitution as part of a commercial continuum indicating either end of a socio-sexual economy" (9), and despite the social difficulties experienced by Nanda and Aggie, Pansy's final confinement renounces her place on this continuum. She may not even participate in the economy and consequently is a prisoner, along with her piano, of her father's making.

The piano's role in James's familial relationships and restrictions is far more than a passing association. "Daughterliness" was central to the Victorian girl's ideal status (Mendelssohn 21), and the piano was emblematic of daughterhood. Pansy plays because the piano and her attention to her practice represent her obligation to her family. "The father's job," as Ruth Solie explains "was to provide for the family's material sustenance," and the mother's responsibilities focused on emotional and spiritual concerns. In this "system of family discipline," the father performs his financial status by purchasing a piano, and the daughter in turn fulfils her obligation to him by practising and providing music for the domestic setting (95).

In this performance practice, the mother was meant to teach the daughter her familial role, and Pansy is clearly lacking her aesthetic and moral influence. Merle may exert some sway on the young girl by playing the piano for her, but it is fleeting, and Pansy's familial duty is entirely directed towards her father. Isabel, attracted to a childhood so different from her own, "was pleased to think [Pansy] performed this duty with rigour" (365), but Osmond is a kind of meta-father in the performance of

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<sup>8</sup> It should also be acknowledged that Nanda's "studied seriousness to the task of making tea" (Mendelssohn 16), has obvious parallels with Pansy's dedication to this domestic practice.

nineteenth-century daughterhood.<sup>9</sup> In almost all instances, the family fails to fulfil the criteria of the myth they perform. The most obvious example of this is that Osmond has quite literally failed in his duty to provide “material sustenance” for his family and must marry Isabel to secure the financial support needed for his daughter.

Pansy’s devotion to her father’s authority is integral to Isabel’s attraction to Osmond. She is seduced by the image of what she considers the ideal father-daughter relationship.

She had carried away an image from her visit to his hill-top [...] the image of a quiet, sensitive, distinguished man, strolling on a moss-grown terrace above the sweet Val d’Arno and holding by the hand a little girl whose bell-like clearness gave a new grace to childhood.  
(327)

Pansy performs her daughterliness with such success that Isabel is immediately taken in and the younger girl facilitates her father’s marriage. When Isabel first plays the piano, it is at Pansy’s request; Isabel plays for the daughter and not her future husband. Fulfilling the motivation behind Merle’s machinations, she secures her role in the family unit by literally taking the absent mother’s seat at the piano stool, thereby encouraging the performance act of piano playing and daughterliness.

Isabel’s positive response to “[h]ow prettily the child had been taught, [...] how simple, how natural, how innocent she had been kept!” (366), clearly shows that she does not intersubjectively recognise the conditions of Pansy’s performance of daughterhood, and the consequences are disastrous for them both. As a result, the control Osmond exerts over his daughter is mirrored in his marital relationship with Isabel. But for all Pansy’s supposed naivety and willingness to perform her part and “obey papa,” Pansy understands far more than Isabel her role and performance acts. She knows and understands “her prospects, her occupations, her father’s intentions,” but she is voiceless. Describing her situation as much as her music, Pansy admits, “I’ve no voice—just a small sound like the squeak of a slate-pencil making flourishes” (368).

When Isabel visits the Osmonds’ hill-top home before her Mediterranean tour, the convention of feminine musicianship is enacted when she “gratified”

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<sup>9</sup> J. Hillis Miller warns us that Osmond “is not an example of the common run of patriarchal males. It will not do to transfer to him without modification generalizations about nineteenth-century patriarchy and the subordination of women” (63).

Pansy's wish to hear her play, and the younger girl "watched her white hands move quickly over the keys." The fulfilment of Pansy's request and Osmond's wish that the young girl should "hear good music" are Isabel's motivation to perform (368), but there are significant links between this piano scene and Merle playing the piano at Gardencourt while an enraptured Isabel listens silently.

She was playing something of Schubert's – Isabel knew not what, but recognized Schubert – and she touched the piano with a discretion of her own. It showed skill, it showed feeling; Isabel sat down noiselessly on the nearest chair and waited till the end of the piece. When it was finished she felt a strong desire to thank the player, and rose from her seat to do so, while at the same time the stranger turned quickly round, as if but just aware of her presence. (225)

Isabel's proficient but mechanical performance for Pansy is what Merle claims to give at Gardencourt by her ironic disclaimer that she is not really musical, rather she has technical skill—"just *du bout des doigts*" (225)<sup>10</sup>—and the links between these two piano scenes continue once the music has stopped. For instance, Isabel's "strong impulse, instantly checked, to say things to Pansy about her father [...] hushed at the horror at the idea of taking advantage of the little girl" (368) is disturbingly similar to Merle's own economy with information when she first meets Isabel.

This dislocation between intention and reception suggests an essential inability on Isabel's part to apply her own knowledge of music to what she hears, and it also reveals that something else is lurking beneath the curtain of Merle's performance. Despite his supposed reluctance to "insist on one's intentions," James himself highlighted the significance of this moment of "conversion" in the Preface to the 1908 edition:

Isabel, coming into the drawing-room [...] finds Madame Merle in possession of the place, Madame Merle seated, all absorbed but all serene, at the piano, and deeply recognizes, in the striking of such an hour, in the presence there, among the gathering shades, of the personage, of whom a moment before she had never so much as heard, a turning point in her life. (*Portrait* 54)

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<sup>10</sup> This phrase is translated in the Penguin edition as "with the fingertips, i.e. very lightly" (644), and in this sense refers to Merle's concern not to disturb the ill Mr. Touchett while she plays. Nevertheless, the phrase also implies rote knowledge or ability—"connaître sur le bout du doigt." In English a musician might self-deprecatingly say that they just rattled off the piece.



The stock image of the pianist as seductress is turned on its head by making both parties female; it seems that at this moment Isabel may be seduced by the very convention of feminine identity and sexuality she claims to reject. Extending Jöttkandt's dialectical analysis of signs and representation in *The Portrait of a Lady* (6-8), and her question, "How, then, does Isabel read?" (6), we might address the musical signs in the novel and ask, "How then, does Isabel *listen*?"

Merle's elusive statement to Isabel, "I'm afraid there are moments in life when even Schubert has nothing to say to us. We must admit, however, that they are our worst" (225-26), indicates a more profound sense of music than merely a feature of confined domesticity. Consequently, Merle's performance stands in stark relief to the other pianos in the novel. It is suggestive of a Romantic force capable of sustaining her through personal tragedy and the need for artistic and emotional consolation. However, Kramer warns us in regard to the discursive nature of music that "[m]eaning is an irrepressibly volatile thing; you really can't have just some of it" (*Cultural Practice* 2). Therefore, criticism of music in *The Portrait of a Lady* needs to negotiate this murky territory between consummate musicianship and domestic convention, all within James's restrictive parameters of performance practice and subjective expression.

Madame Merle's talent is exceptional in comparison with other Victorian piano girls. "[S]he assays the subtleties of Schubert," enthuses Mary Burgan, unlike other women who "played for show" and "were more likely to bang through a piece like 'The Battle of Prague'" (Burgan 57). Burgan's implication is obvious: Romantic music is clearly the domain of the concert performer and not the domesticated piano girl, therefore Merle is a singular, and potentially radical, musician. Schubert is certainly a more radical composer than the previously mentioned Charles Gounod (1818-1893), who was extremely popular during this time and famous for his "emotional facility" compatible with the "aesthetic conservatism" of the bourgeoisie (M. Cooper 586). Nevertheless, Burgan's assessment not only ignores that no one really ever plays the piano for show in the novel, but also Schubert's domesticated reputation, more in keeping with the piano girl than the concert stage.

Considered "the apostle of German Romanticism" and the great transmitter of Goethe's poetry in music (Haweis 268), Schubert was a composer praised for his

lyricism and spontaneity. Goethe's early *Sturm und Drang* period indirectly associated the composer with that aesthetic of "anti-rational" and subjective emotion (Hartz 311), but Schubert equally inspired the critique of "a certain slipper-and-dressing-gown style" (Haweis 288). His music heralded the phenomenon of the educated, middle-class but fervently amateur musician, and was the very essence of the Biedermeier sensibility in music.

Even when Merle plays in the evenings at Gardencourt, it—like the other piano scenes in the novel—is always a private, domestic endeavour, set apart from societal scrutiny, and James's 1908 repertoire change from Beethoven to the "subtleties of Schubert" confirms rather than denies this domestic performance practice. As Laura F. Hodges discusses, the authorial amendment observes the distinctly private nature of Schubert's music and "his playing 'among friends.'"<sup>11</sup> The music is more appropriate to the "the intimate social plane on which [Merle] functions throughout the novel" than the "powerful and groundbreaking music" of Beethoven (4-5). Furthermore, as the musicologist Scott Messing argues in his discussion of *The Portrait of a Lady* within the context of other Victorian works of literature, the "feminine nature" of Schubert's music was "deeply rooted in the popular consciousness of the fin de siècle [...]" (143).

Schubert's most famous compositions have always been his *lieder* (of which he wrote over six hundred) and his numerous short piano pieces. As the nineteenth century progressed, the cultural association of song and miniature piano forms with feminine musicianship resulted in Victorian society limiting Schubert's fame to that of a "feminine" songwriter, all intuition and expression, without the intellection and concentration of a great musical master.<sup>12</sup> This reputation is perhaps most succinctly expressed by Daniel Deronda when he speaks of Schubert in the same breath as declaring that Mirah Lapidoth has "a delicious voice for a room" (374). Schubert,

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<sup>11</sup> This concept of Schubert's domestic performance practice refers primarily to his famous gatherings with friends such as Josef von Spaun and the poet Johann Mayrhofer to play through new compositions. He was so well known in Viennese society for private performances that these evenings became known as *Schubertiads*. As *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* points out, the Moritz von Schwind sepia drawing *Schubert Abend bei Joseph von Spaun* "enshrines forever the Biedermeier atmosphere of the Schubertiads" (M. Brown 759).

<sup>12</sup> Haweis writes that "[w]orks belonging to the highest order of genius depend upon the rare combination of three distinct qualities,—(1) Invention, (2) Expression, (3) Concentration. Speaking generally, we may say that Beethoven and Mozart possessed all three. [...]; Schubert the first and second" (282).

although “a great musician in the fullest sense of the word” (207)<sup>13</sup> has a talent like Mirah’s, best suited to “private parties or concerts” (374).

These attitudes were largely informed by the enthusiasm of Robert Schumann in the 1830s. He assigned to Schubert the appellation *Mädchencharakter*, which was conceived in direct comparison with Beethoven.

To one who has some degree of cultivation and feeling, Beethoven and Schubert may be recognised, yet held apart, on their very first pages. Schubert is a maidenly character compared to the other, far more talkative, softer, broader; compared to him he is a child, sporting carelessly among the giants. (296)

It was not unusual to compare Schubert with Beethoven, as both composers were from Vienna and had died within two years of each other.<sup>14</sup> Linked in the public imagination, they represented two distinct forms of German Romanticism: Beethoven, the revolutionary power of the symphony, and the younger Schubert, the poetic inspiration of German song.

Schumann solidified this ideological comparison in nineteenth-century musical thinking and I cannot help but wonder if James read the first English version of Schumann’s *Music and Musicians*, published in 1877 and translated by Fanny Raymond Ritter, after he had published *The Portrait of a Lady* and eventually realised his own narrative “error.”<sup>15</sup> He certainly made use of this understanding of Schubert and Beethoven in *The Bostonians*, published in 1886. Mrs. Burrage’s request for her son to play “some little thing” on the piano becomes the “perfume of Schubert and Mendelssohn.” Henry Burrage’s effeminacy is confirmed by his sentimental music that mingles with the objects of the domestic drawing room: covered lamps; cabinets; brackets; “some ivory carving or cinque-cento cup” (119).

This is in direct contrast to the Bach and Beethoven Olive Chancellor listens to with great reverence at the Music Hall:

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<sup>13</sup> Catherine Arrowpoint uses this phrase to describe Herr Klesmer: “He is a great musician in the fullest sense of the word. He will rank with Schubert and Mendelssohn” (*Daniel Deronda* 207).

<sup>14</sup> See Haweis, who goes to great and rather fanciful lengths to confirm the association between the two men, despite the fact that they probably only met briefly just before Beethoven’s death in 1827 (279-80).

<sup>15</sup> The only mention of Schubert that I can find in James’s papers is in a letter from Constance Fenimore Woolson (May 7th, 1883), in which she discusses the sights and sounds of Venice during the evening: “And then I sit in my red-cushioned balcony, and watch the lights on the gliding gondolas, and the colored lanterns of the music-barges, and listen for some music—and make out Schubert’s “Serenade.” (Edel, *Henry James Letters* 550).

Symphonies and fugues only stimulated their convictions, excited their revolutionary passion, led their imagination further in the direction in which it was always pressing. It lifted them to immeasurable heights; and they sat looking at the great florid, sombre organ, overhanging the bronze statue of Beethoven, they felt that this was the only temple in which the votaries of their creed could worship. (138)

There is certainly an air of the much-feared “Margaret-ghost”<sup>16</sup> in this idolatry of Beethoven and the “great genius” Bach (Fuller, “Entertainments” 57). Beethoven in particular represents the age of revolution and inspires a social action reminiscent of Margaret Fuller’s journalism from the 1840s; Schubert and Mendelssohn signify a more luxurious, but feminised complacency. Olive may “surrender herself” momentarily to “the young man’s charming art” (119), but the effect on Verena Tarrant is more lasting:

It would be very nice to do that always - just to take men as they are, and not to have to think about their badness. It would be very nice not to have so many questions, but to think they were all comfortably answered, so that one could sit there on an old Spanish leather chair, with the curtains drawn and keeping out the cold, the darkness, all the big, terrible, cruel world--sit there and listen for ever to Schubert and Mendelssohn. *They* didn’t care anything about female suffrage! And I didn’t feel the want of a vote to-day at all, did you?” Verena inquired, ending, as she always ended in these few speculations, with an appeal to Olive. (121)

Isabel’s response is therefore informed by an understanding of what Merle’s performance ought to signify: talent beyond the ordinary and intuitive Romantic feeling, but still framed by recognisable domestic forms. In this sense, the retrospective change of composer confirms the characterisations already at play in the novel, because Schubert crosses that boundary of high art and domestic performance practice in a way Beethoven cannot and locates Merle’s performance in a distinctly feminine context.

James presumably reckoned that—for this initial exchange between his two principal female protagonists—Schubert could serve as a more meaningful musical intermediary whose gendered character could symbolize obverse elements of women’s nature: innocence and motherhood. (Messing 128)

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<sup>16</sup> In *William Wetmore Story and Friends* (1903), Henry James characterises Margaret Fuller as the “Margaret-ghost,” a figure who haunts American thought and writing (1: 127).



“[W]oman’s listening,” Messing continues, “becomes as intuitive as Schubertian creativity and as tractable as the work itself” (134), and the composer’s reputation fulfils the requirements of Merle’s “distinct” performance and inherently signifies Isabel’s initial judgement of her as “a Juno or a Niobe” (*Portrait* 228).

Of course, the great irony is that it is the very *intractability* of the work and the performer that obscures meaning. We only get a tantalising snippet of the piece, “something of Schubert’s” (225). It does not matter what because Isabel cannot place the piece.<sup>17</sup> In regard to the repertoire change, Beethoven is an unlikely candidate. In the general consciousness of the time he was defined and well-known; the great figure of nineteenth-century artistry. Despite his apparent domestic reputation, Schubert was delightfully less fixed, as H.L. Mencken wrote in 1928: “Franz Schubert, at least in Anglo-Saxondom, has evaded the indignity of too much popularity. [...]. It is familiar, but not thread-bare” (57). Merle is familiar but not thread-bare to Isabel; the Juno who arranges marriages and the Niobe who weeps for her lost children, but all the while concealing herself from those around her.

A pejorative reading of Merle’s performance relies on an understanding of the Romantic musician as a dangerously attractive other, who is a threat to the conventional world, particular the weak-minded. It also must view Merle in sexual terms, manipulating what Kramer defines as “the erotic script of heterosexual seduction” located in the bourgeois piano (*After the Lovedeath* 202)—Isabel, like Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, is “won by the sirens” because she fails to get herself “lashed to the mast” (299). It is in this context that Merle becomes a “consummate villain” (Miller 63)—the blackbird reminiscent of Laclos’s Marquise de Merteuil in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1798)<sup>18</sup>—and Isabel the passive victim of her performative acts. This conception of Merle’s character has caused one critic to suggest that James was amongst that cast of writers who “popularized suspicions of

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<sup>17</sup> Over six hundred lieder and nearly two hundred piano works have been attributed to the composer, who died aged 31. Therefore, hypothetical arguments about which Schubert piece it could have been are impossible and largely irrelevant. We might suggest that it was an impromptu, which hints at a free and spontaneous idea within the structure of written music, but even then, Schubert’s impromptus were considered and highly wrought incidental pieces and not the potent and unchecked outpourings of the composer’s soul.

<sup>18</sup> Merle translates as blackbird in French, and the notes to the Penguin edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* also make mention of the similarities between James’s narrative and the seduction triangle of Merteuil, Valmont and Cécile de Volanges in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (645).



Romantic music in the fiction of the period” as “sensual, immoral, and irresistible, especially to females” (Dawson 88).

However, such a reading runs contrary to the critical approach that sees in James’s narrative an encouragement not “to denounce Madame Merle as wicked, for example, for viewed within the human focus of the novel she becomes a centre for Isabel’s sympathy and understanding [...]” (Taylor 130). Casting Merle as a dangerous Romantic musician is also complicated by the novel’s other piano girls, because it defines music as an unconventional act that threatens social norms. Rather, Merle’s performance has something to say about the conditions of feminine musicianship and is critical to James’s development of Isabel as “an Emersonian figure whose untested approach to life is challenged and shown to be inadequate when confronted with the manipulative reality of thoroughly Europeanised Americans” (Taylor 22).

James’s own description of this supposed “phonological seduction” (Boren 56) offers a good introduction to further analysis of Isabel’s reception of music and suggests a manipulation of the Romantic cliché. Isabel is the centre of the action and motivation. She is the one who comes into the drawing-room and “finds” Merle “all absorbed” at the piano, drawing the music and consequently the influence of Merle towards her. We should consider James’s assessment that he was “producing the maximum of intensity with the minimum of strain” (*Portrait* 54), and while it is true that Isabel is captivated by Merle’s performance and personality, eventually becoming ensnared in her schemes, James does not make it clear whether this was the intention of the performance in the first place. Merle’s surprise at seeing Isabel might be part of her consummate performance, or her machinations might only begin from that moment of Isabel’s unexpected appearance and enthusiastic response. Irregardless of any subsequent manipulation, this marks her as an active auditor and not a passive receiver of potentially dangerous repertoire or intent.

James’s pianos in other novels seem to suggest an ideological pattern that manipulation by music has more to do with the auditor than the performance itself. For instance, Morris Townsend’s drawing room performance at the piano in *Washington Square* (1880) is designed to impress his prospective in-laws, “not that he flattered himself that this would help bring [Catherine Sloper’s] father round”

(40). It is Catherine's aunt, Mrs. Penniman, who is taken in by the young man's "sweet, light, tenor voice" (40)—hardly surprising for a woman James characterises as a "romantic," and quite set on finding her niece a lover (9): "she was sentimental, she had a passion for little secrets and mysteries—a very innocent passion, for her secrets had hitherto always been as unpractical as addled eggs" (9). In other words, she is just the right sort of woman to take fancy to a few silly parlour songs.

Similarly, Mr. Burrage's performance in *The Bostonians* uses music as a conduit of influence on the young Verana Tarrant, so much so that it reveals her lack of independent dedication to the woman's suffrage movement. Verana is quite deliberately being influenced and controlled by a variety of forces around her. Indeed, her talent at inspirational speaking is the channelled opinions of more dominant individuals. Therefore, it is unsurprising that music has the same power as any ideology on the mind of the young woman.

This is not, however, the contemporary fear of music as degenerate—art's "slight deviation from perfect health" (Nordau 553)—but rather James's criticism of the "Emersonian confidence" in the essential self and its "powers of perception and interpretation" (Taylor 135). He casts serious doubt on the belief, as expressed by Margaret Fuller forty years before *The Portrait of a Lady* was first published, that "[w]hatever is truly felt has some precious meaning" (*Letters* 3: 209).

Isabel approaches Merle's performance from a perspective informed by her Transcendentalist ideals and similar ideologies to those present in Eliot's novels—her education clearly influences her response to music. Not music as a destructive force, but the reflection of the true self that transcends social convention. A belief based on the Hegelian principle that music is "the art of the soul and is directly addressed to the soul" (Hegel 891). This understanding of music was keenly felt in the popular philosophy of the time, and is central to H.R. Haweis's highly successful theory of musical reception:

It reveals us to ourselves—it represents those modulations and temperamental changes which escape all verbal analysis—it utters what must else for ever remain unuttered and unutterable—it feeds that deep, ineradicable instinct within us of which all art is only the reverberated echo, that craving to express, through the medium of the senses, the spiritual and eternal realities which underlie them! (286)

One ought to be carried away by Romantic music; one may find contempt but not fear in domesticity. Boren writes that “the conflicts that Isabel experiences are conveyed in the tensions between the music of the soul and the strictures of conventional language” (53), but her observation that “Isabel is as sensitive to the liberating influence of music as she is innocent of its seductions [...]” does not go far enough in determining the importance of musical reception on Isabel’s decision-making (56). The signs presented in “something of Schubert’s” suggest that it is conventional language Isabel has the most difficulty interpreting, and her response to Pansy’s music shows that she is equally as innocent of the restrictive power of domestic music in her society. She trusts her “ineradicable instinct” like she trusts her Emersonian spirit (Haweis 286), but fails to see unexpected multiplicities of meaning in the musical signs.

Merle’s performance must not be read in isolation from the other piano girls in the novel. To do so ignores Isabel’s parallel misinterpretation of Pansy’s own musicianship—a performance practice certainly not tarnished by a fear of Romantic excess and self-expression—and its relation to their mutual subjugation by Osmond. Pansy’s repetitive hammering through scales and exercises is the very opposite of her mother’s musical discretion, and appears a rather double-edged inherited gift. Significantly, it is only through the piano that Pansy feels close to the woman who is actually her mother. Her “great facility” at the piano is what Pansy likes “best about Madame Merle” (369), and it therefore functions as another subtle means of control over the girl. Nevertheless, both characters reveal tremendous self-renunciation through their shared experience in the social construct of domestic musicianship. Merle’s self-discipline at concealing her maternity is mirrored in Pansy’s fervent obedience to Osmond. Merle becomes the masterful “player” of concealment; Pansy mechanically hammers out the *études* of her mother’s art which she can never perform; and eventually, Isabel will have to decide whether to be the consummate performer in her role as Osmond’s wife or mechanically rehearse the notation of that score.

The Osmonds are certainly not the congenial domestic unit like the March family in *Little Women*, singing Christmas carols accompanied by Beth, who gains personal fulfilment as she enacts her family role at the piano, but returning to

Rosier's inclination that "nationality would complicate the question," one must ask if the women are playing "American" pianos. Not American pianos in the sense of an adherence to the principles of domesticity or even the Marches' Transcendentalism, but a musicianship shaped by an American understanding of European aesthetics. Merle's assertion about the unfitness of the expatriate American community for their lives in Europe—"If we're not good Americans we're certainly poor Europeans; we've no natural place here" (248)—suggests that these women might be playing "American" pianos. We certainly do not see any European women playing the piano, and the implication of Pansy's forced renunciation of the socio-sexual market, and also any aesthetic participation in music, questions the cultural field represented in her performance practice.

How does the American father raise a "free keen girl" in Europe without losing his authority and investment capital embodied in his daughter? Gilbert Osmond's approach to this cultural dilemma is from the position of an aesthete, under whose terms the symbolic consumption of the work of art or the playing of a piano need not have a practical function.<sup>19</sup> Pansy's endless scales are, to the point of absurdity, a parody of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "domestic cultural training, [...] characterized by the suspension and removal of economic necessity and by objective and subjective distance from practical urgencies [...]" (*Distinction* 54). Of course, this is in Bourdieuan terms part of the *illusio*—the belief in the game of culture (54)—, as Pansy's scales are designed to procure a husband, but her education can be read as the response of the thoroughly Europeanised father's reaction to the potential for music (read subjective control) to break free from the domestic space.

Given that Merle is the girl's mother, it hardly seems surprising that Osmond might hypocritically fear for his daughter's future potential to do as she pleases. Therefore, it is best to maintain the exercises of musicianship and leave potentially subjective repertoire safely alone. In such an approach, we might see Pansy's convent education as a best fit compromise for a Catholic-convert, Europeanised, but essentially American Puritan father. This is potentially an unarguable theory, as the Americanness James portrays is one steeped in Transcendentalism and natural

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<sup>19</sup> Bourdieu writes that "[t]he aesthetic disposition, [...] can only be constituted within an experience of the world freed from urgency and through the practice of activities which are an end to themselves, such as scholastic exercises or the contemplation of works of art" (*Distinction* 54).

innocence, not the highly theorised domesticity of Catharine Beecher. Nevertheless, the American “free keen girl” was still part of that American womanhood whose members “carried their authority only within their largely domestic and personal ‘spheres’” (Douglas 43), and tucked away within the transatlantic concerns of *The Portrait of a Lady*, lies the piano with its European origins and burgeoning American successes.

In 1867, only a few years prior to the setting of the novel, the American piano firms Steinway and Chickering had both won gold medals at the Paris Exposition, establishing the United States at the forefront of concert piano production (Loesser 512).<sup>20</sup> Concurrent with its American ascendancy, the domestic piano as an object of cultural and symbolic worth was losing some of its value in European society. As early as 1843, when Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann were at the height of their fame, Heinrich Heine satirically wrote that the predominance of the pianoforte—“that instrument of torture wherewith present high society is most especially tormented and chastised for all its usurpations”—was destroying artistic sensibilities and that it, along with the theatre inherited from the aristocracy, was the bourgeoisie’s punishment for being the ruling class (“Musical Feuilletons” 445).<sup>21</sup>

By the 1870s, the domestic piano was in certain circles “considered somewhat vulgar,” associated with the aspirations of the petit-bourgeoisie (Corbin 531), and James encapsulates this changing opinion in *Washington Square* when he connects Catherine’s Sloper’s “talent” at the piano with Mrs. Perriman’s decision to “[take] in hand the child’s accomplishments” (9). Loesser is quick to point out the protests of the “antipianists” were in vain (416), but popularity has its downside for the self-appointed keepers of elite culture. As Bourdieu writes, “[a]esthetic

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Bradbury notes in *Dangerous Pilgrimages* that the Singer sewing machine also “fascinated crowds at the fair” (159). Although he does not mention the piano, the fact that American sewing machines and pianos were both star items at the Paris Exposition reinforces Loesser’s observation that the two items were significantly linked in American culture and industry (461).

<sup>21</sup> This quotation from Heine’s *Lutetia* (20 March 1843) is taken from a selection of Heine’s musical articles published in *The Musical Quarterly* (July 1922). However, there is no full English translation of the complete *Lutetia* writings and the original extract is as follows:

Mais la bourgeoisie régnante n’a pas seulement, pour le rachat de ses fautes à endurer de vieilles tragedies classiques et des trilogies; non, les puissances célestes lui ont encore infligé une jouissance d’art bien plus horrible, celle du piano-forte, auquel on ne peut plus maintenant échapper nulle part, qu’on entend résonner dans toutes les maisons, en toute société, le jour at la nuit. Oui, piano-forte est le nom de l’instrument de torture par lequel le beau monde de nos jours est tout particulièrement châtié pour toutes ses usurpations. (*Lutezia II* 180)



intolerance can be terribly violent,” and “[t]he most intolerable thing for those who regard themselves as the possessors of legitimate culture is the sacrilegious reuniting of tastes which taste dictates be separated” (*Distinction* 56-57).

Unsurprisingly, as the piano became commonplace, it lost its appeal to high society, not just in regard to feminine education but also in the manner of music performance within the domestic space. The domestic aesthetic of amateur music-making celebrated by James Fenimore Cooper in *Homeward Bound* made way for professional musicians being brought into the private space for domestic performances. Isabel’s entertainments, always held at the Palazzo Roccanera on a Thursday (429), quite clearly show this cultural shift in domestic music, as does the piano’s significant absence from the “mechanical doll” education of Little Aggie in *The Awkward Age* (41). The upper classes’ infatuation with the domestic piano had reached its peak by the middle of the century, and for the next seventy years, it would remain a stable, but not necessarily highly-valued signifier in the cultural expectations of bourgeois society, as Arthur Loesser discusses:

It expressed their sense of progress achieved and maintained, their comfortable equation of moral with financial superiority, their tolerant disdain of laborers and “backward” peoples, their certainty of the exact location of “woman’s place,” and their general sense of security. (430)

The piano as a symbol of moral and financial superiority certainly helped its commercial success in the United States, but it was not nearly as widespread a domestic object as in Europe, facilitating its high class status. Loesser writes that according to the 1887 annual convention of the Music Teachers’ National Association, “there were 500,000 piano pupils in the United States,” which is not especially significant out of a population of over sixty million. He estimates that perhaps “eight per cent of the nation’s youth was playing the piano after some fashion,” and that whatever the inaccuracies of such figures, “piano dabbling was far from universal.” Isabel Archer is clearly of the class of Americans who “might have said in their fatuous way that ‘everyone took piano lessons,’” but the reality was quite different (540).

*The Portrait of a Lady* is full of Americans desperately trying to achieve both European status and possess European objects. The piano represents another example in James’s novel of what Kathleen Lawrence calls the “the absurdity of an

American's position abroad." The "inveterate social climber" Osmond is an "extreme case" of this (57):

Although Osmond collects the canonical "Old Masters" such as Coreggio and Caravaggio, he loves them mainly for the thrill of having found their paintings at a bargain, for having satisfied his impulse for acquisition. [...] Although resident in Italy for three decades, Osmond still buys like a bourgeois tourist (59).

And Isabel and Pansy still play their pianos like bourgeois ladies (I shall come to Merle and her "Europeanness" in due course). The piano is an obvious representation of their womanhood, but slightly more middle-brow that the family may care to admit.

Private concerts are now provided by professional musicians and the daughter at the piano has lost some of her social function and significance. Even the professional musicians the Osmond family hire for Isabel's social evenings are nameless, faceless tradesmen with no higher value than the service they provide and the cultural capital they thereby confer on the family. Particularly for Pansy, the almost solitary way she and Isabel perform their accomplishments becomes much more understandable for the cultured Europe they inhabit. Music is an educational requirement comparable with basic arithmetic and not necessarily a valued accomplishment in its own right. Thus, James's expatriate society struggles with placing the much needed piano girl into this social aesthetic.

Nevertheless, this is not simply an issue of gauche Americans misapplying European signifiers of status, because the uncertain social role of the female musician is one keenly addressed in *Daniel Deronda*. "[A]ll that can attach emotionally and dramatically to music," writes Beryl Gray of Eliot's novel, "is of consequence" (100), and the narrative is in part focussed on the cultural position of music, both amateur and professional, in Victorian society, and the influence this has on marriage, career, and social status. In a changing musical environment that is moving away from the celebrated lady amateur, Gwendolen Harleth must learn that her drawing room talents do not translate to the public arena, and that despite her periodic need to earn some money, her musicality cannot be turned "into the capital that would give her control of her circumstances" (Colón 300).

Gwendolen's constant efforts to make a musician of herself are thwarted by her amateurism and by English prejudice towards professional musicians. The novel

reflects “a peculiar dichotomy in nineteenth-century attitudes towards music,” as Byerly discusses: “music was extolled as the most sublime and expressive of the arts, but in practice, it was treated as a social diversion, a trivial accomplishment best left to ladies and foreigners” (2). Eliot gives the voice of musical authority to Julius Klesmer (described by Susan Colón as “the romantic-heroic German musician”), and divides the new professional scene into two choices: “‘higher’ vocation—the single-minded pursuit of excellence in art—and ‘lower’ profession—the self-interested attainment of a level of proficiency that brings capitalist profit [...]” (Colón 300). This higher vocation for music is how Kate Chopin portrayed her character Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*, but neither option is attainable for Gwendolen. Furthermore, in regard to *The Portrait of a Lady*, although the professionalisation of music informs the novel, Merle cannot be read as a figure poised on the edge of a society ready to accept the professional female musician, despite the temptation to do so.

It is appropriate to return to James’s repertoire change, because it has continued repercussions for the significance of Merle’s performance in the context of this changing musical aesthetic. “Empowered socially as well as artistically,” writes Melanie Dawson, “the performer, for the first time, becomes associated with control; the performer’s music meant power” (88). Using this information and to confirm her argument that Henry James equates Romantic music with social degeneration, she chooses to quote the 1881 text.<sup>22</sup> She writes in her notes:

The 1881 publication more strongly voices James’s view of Madame Merle as an artist. In the 1881 version Madame Merle is a “brilliant musician” who plays Beethoven and has the touch “of an artist.” In the revised edition she, a “brave musician,” plays Schubert (a much less controversial composer); her playing reveals “skill” and “feeling,” but not artistry. (97)

The relative merits of the composers’ controversial reputations is another argument in its own right, as it depends on which history of each composer you choose to

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<sup>22</sup> In the context of James’s narrative, Dawson rather simplistically aligns Merle with “demoniac power” and her music as the “all-disturbing power of sensuality” (88), which are contradictory to my own reading of Merle and her influence on Isabel. An essential problem with Dawson’s argument is that she is trying to make Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* stand out as an original treatment of music on the female soul. Chopin’s use of music is discussed in further depth in the following chapter, but Dawson fails to consider for James’s narrative what she claims of Chopin, that these scenes might “suggest (but not fulfill) stereotypes and clichés with Romantic music” (94).

accept, but Dawson's reading of Beethoven allows Merle to be read as an artist in the context of Chopin's Mademoiselle Reisz, whom I shall discuss in the following chapter.

Although James does remove the sentence, "[h]er touch was one of an artist" from the later edition (1881 367), it is apparent that he does so to make this scene more consistent with the full complexities of her character. She may have once had great ambitions, but in this society and its musical expectations they now would make her "ridiculous by talking of them" (1908 251). However, whereas in 1881 Merle "touched the piano softly and discreetly" (367), in the 1908 edition "she plays with a discretion of her own" (225), by far a more subjective, intractable, and no less skilful description than the former. Semantically speaking, not even artistry can have fixed meaning when it comes to Merle. Furthermore, Dawson's point that in the 1908 edition, Merle went from being a "brilliant musician" to a "brave musician" is actually taken out of context. This description occurs within the narrative discussion of Merle's accomplishments and her "social quality": "it was evidence of the fact that when she seated herself at the piano, as she always did in the evening, her listeners resigned themselves without a murmur to losing the grace of her talk" (1908 243). Her bravery refers to her perpetual routine of domestic accomplishments, her front of serenity and her performance of concealed motherhood.

There is a definite feeling of rehearsed activity in Merle's "social quality," reminiscent of Haweis's appraisal of Schubert's enormous musical output: "But he who, like Coleridge, is always talking, is not always equally well worth listening to" (288). It would be a tenuous connection indeed to continue this line of comparison, for the serene Merle is hardly like the "man who was in the habit of rising late, and finishing his breakfast and half-a-dozen songs together" (Haweis 288), but there is more than a hint of sarcasm in the narrator's assessment of Merle's accomplishments. Not without censure are we told that "[s]he had become too flexible, too useful, was too ripe and too final" (244). James is not writing a character like Mademoiselle Reisz within the context of professionalism because Merle, like Isabel and Pansy, has no expectation of a musicianship and audience that translates into the public arena.

Serena Merle is self-confessedly of another age: "I was born before the French Revolution. [...], I belong to the old, old world" (248). Of course, she is not a hundred years old and she is in fact American by birth, but her daily regime of reading, painting, needlework and never being idle does belong to a fading, if not altogether past age. An age in direct contrast to the modern Henrietta Stackpole, who according to Ralph, "does smell of the Future" (147). Merle does not play like a bourgeois lady and she does not play like a professional musician. She plays like a grand lady in a Parisian salon whose ideas and influence can be exerted from within the safety of the private sphere and away from public censure.

Her mid-Atlantic identity provides her with a certain freedom from the strictures of both European and her compatriots' societies, but her tenuous social position as an adulteress and unmarried mother means she must constantly manipulate the signs of her Europeaness, her Americanness, and her womanhood. The new world does not work for her, but the old, European world of the accomplished lady provides her with the social capital to circulate the great houses of Europe and avoid recognition as Pansy's natural mother. Indeed, naturalness, like nationality is a concept Merle cannot afford to be absolutist or sentimental about: "a woman," she states, "has no natural place anywhere [...]" (248), and this recognition of the artificiality of feminine convention allows her to manipulate it as she requires.

Merle declares to Isabel that she has "a great respect for *things!*" (253), and the piano is one of those things. Like Cassandra Morgeson, Merle is not only aware that the piano is imposed on her by society, she accepts and utilises the imposition. It is something to be picked up and put down with as much ease and skill as necessity requires. She is very conscious of the inconsistencies between the self and the arbitrary signs of accomplishments, and subjectively uses them in a way Isabel does not. Unconvinced by the influence of signs on her essential identity, Jöttkandt argues that Merle "puts them to work for herself, and understand their power for creating meanings" (9).

In approaching repertoire as a feature of the text capable of providing discursive meaning, Schubert allows Merle to fulfil her fluid conception of the self and cultural signs. That "slipper and dressing-gown" quality of Schubert frames Merle's accomplishments in an older performance practice, but most importantly, his



Romanticism provides Merle with an artistic fulfilment that justifies her borderless existence. Schubert evokes an intangibility that suits her emotional and domestic needs, absorbing her very tangible sexuality into a less tractable form. Merle might be ostracised from her society, but she is never desexualised. Consequently, she can use the piano to its full symbolic level. It is a conduit of Romantic artistic emotion and a conduit of domestic sensibility.

It is important, however, to recognise that Merle's objective understanding of the piano as a "game of culture" does not free her from it, because as Bourdieu theorises, recognition of the game does not allow exemption from its operations.

There is no way out of the game of culture; and one's only chance of objectifying the true nature of the game is to objectify as fully as possible the very operations which one is obliged to use in order to achieve that objectification. (*Distinction* 12)

Like Pansy and Isabel, Merle only performs to a limited audience, but unlike them, she can play for herself. Solie's theory of "the mythic system of representation that enfolded the piano-girls" includes an understanding that the act of learning music demanded that a girl "absorbs the essence of the larger aesthetic and emotional realm that made her femininity convincing." (94-95). This definition of the piano girl demands an emotional focus not found in either of Isabel and Pansy's musicianship. Despite the fact that the women fulfil societal expectations through their piano-playing—or performance of womanhood—they cannot like Merle or, for that matter, a character like Beth March, satisfy their own individual needs of fulfilment at the piano.

Merle's objective and intersubjective understanding is most apparent in her response to Pansy's education—unfortunately, something over which she has only limited control. Whereas the liberally-educated Isabel is delighted by what she sees as the ideal young girl and her father's exemplary devotion, Merle is aware of the inconsistencies between Pansy's piano-playing obedience and her essential identity. Put simply, Pansy's piano-playing does not make her femininity convincing. Merle's introductory appraisal to Isabel of Osmond's parenting, "if it were a career to be an excellent father he'd be very distinguished" (249), is sardonic at best. Her dislike of Pansy's convent education is made very obvious when Osmond expresses that he likes "what they've made of her. It's very charming." Merle's response, as William

G. Sayres discusses, is emphatic (235): "That's not the convent. It's the child's nature." The convent, like the piano, does not represent anything of Pansy, other than her restricted existence, and Merle is the only person who immediately recognises that she "has had enough of the convent" (*Portrait* 294).

Therefore, the reason we never see Pansy play the piano for Rosier (fulfilling a conventional erotic script of heterosexual seduction) is because she does not need it to attract him. Her "nature" is not evident in her music and therefore does not contain her natural attractions. Similarly, from the very first mention of Isabel's musical accomplishments it is apparent that her audience would rather engage with her than hear her play. Musically their pianos fulfil only limited social function and the great tragedy is that symbolically, their pianos are subdued to the point of sterility.

The piano is an emblem of the socio-sexual economy, but neither character requires it. Isabel has independent wealth and therefore it is unsurprising that she has little need for an accomplishment designed to increase capital in the marriage market, but even before Pansy is removed from that market, her piano-playing has no role in her brief coming out. She never plays for anyone other than Isabel and the nuns, and rather than being antitheatrical per se, she is in a state of perpetual rehearsal for a role she will never perform. The piano and the convent are as inextricably linked as the piano is to paternal obedience: "In Rome, from the convent, we saw nothing but roofs and bell-towers. I practice three hours. I don't play very well" (367). As sure as the three-hourly progression of monastic daylight prayers,<sup>23</sup> Pansy performs her renunciation at the piano and the novel declares that the high ideals of bell-towers, previously embodied in Caspar Goodwood, have the potential to imprison young ladies. Pansy's piano quite literally reveals the entrapment of feminine things.

The final mention of the piano in the novel is at the convent. Pansy has been sent there because her father considers that "the world, always the world, is very bad for a young girl" (576). Pansy has a "charming little room [...] with a piano and flowers," and Merle remarks that it is "not in the least conventual" (597). Of course, the pun is obvious, it may not be like a convent, but it is conventional. Merle and Isabel, both visiting Pansy, have their final encounter with each other in this space of

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<sup>23</sup> According to the Benedictine pattern of monastic prayers, the daytime "hours" between Matins and Vespers occurred at three-hourly intervals. They were Prime (during the first hour of daylight), Terce (at the third hour), Sext (at the sixth hour) and None (at the ninth hour).

feminine confinement and they are all equally removed from society: Pansy in the convent; Isabel in her marriage; and Madame Merle in her exile to America. They are removed from the world and from each other, both physically and ideologically. There is understanding between the women, especially Merle and Isabel, but no means of unity or power to change the situation. This final meeting validates M. Guilia Fabi's observation that the heroines' "interpersonal confrontations" with other women "do not result in a heightened awareness of the larger societal mechanisms of patriarchal control" (2). Thus the piano becomes symbolic and symptomatic of "their ghettoization in the private sphere [...] that leaves institutional male domination largely unchallenged" (2).

This might almost be the moment when Schubert has nothing to say to us, either through Romantic expression or domestic convention. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that Pansy and her piano do indeed reveal the wider prison of domesticity in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and that the performance of conventional acts does not in the end allow for even the appearance of freedom. The piano, from Isabel's first shadowy entrance into the drawing room at Gardencourt, forewarns of the prison they all must ultimately inhabit. Isabel takes as truth only part of the significance of Merle's music and fails to see the corroborative signs within her own and Pansy's musicianship. Her solipsistic ideals prevent her from recognising her own adherence to the devastating restriction of "convention itself." Consequently, within the desexualised feminine space of the convent, all hope of self-transcendence is shattered.

Stripped of its possibilities for Romantic subjectivity, the accomplishment of piano-playing is seen bleakly for what it is in this novel—a means of social and personal control. If "[a] woman's natural mission is to be where she's most appreciated" (314), as Osmond says to Isabel, then in this environment, a woman is certainly not appreciated at a piano, and James calls into question the idea that there is such a thing as a "natural mission" in the first place. In fact, only Merle seems able to retain her ability to manipulate the signs of this confinement. Her "proud penance" when telling Isabel that she will return to America (605), despite her abhorrence of the Atlantic crossing, can perhaps be read as the recognition that while America means exile, she does not renounce her music. She may be more unhappy than

anyone else in the novel, but Schubert still has something to say to her; musically at least, Pansy and Isabel will only have a piano.

However, the final mention of the instrument is not the conclusion of the novel and therefore, we must be careful not to oversimplify this concept of musical renunciation. Otherwise, the only conclusion possible is that Isabel effectively damns herself to being Osmond's wife, because she doesn't listen to Schubert properly, failing to acknowledge the domestic truths within the Romantic expression. However, Isabel does eventually come to understand the fullness of Merle's performance and her response, and as Taylor argues, there is a freedom in Isabel's anti-Romantic "recognition of her own complicity." If this "appears renunciatory and restrictive, it nevertheless signals a more sophisticated conception of autonomy in complex societies and James's refusal to be seduced by impossible alternatives" (139).

Laura Hodges also comes to a similar conclusion in her study of James's lyrical use of musical analogies:

Not only has she learned to recognize the deceptive music of the world and the worldly—the *musica mundane* and *musica humana*—but also how it differs from the music of the spheres, which refreshes the spirit, and for which she yearned through her desire to do something fine with her life. (14)

Isabel is now able to separate her belief in the "nondenotative allure of music" (Boren 43) from the manipulations of musical meaning in performance practice. Like her independence at the end of the novel when making a decision about her marriage, however bleak the outcome, she recognises that the performance and reception of music is "predicated upon boundaries, concessions and 'circumstances'" (Taylor 140).

The piano, with all its suggestions of Romantic expression and the potential for radical subjectivity—a force so apparent in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and the subject of my final chapter—is not merely another signifier in Isabel's litany of misread signs, but further indication of James's refusal to romanticise the circumstances of society. The women perform their actual limitations, and this feminine limitation is suggestive of a wider concern that the convention of the domestic and feminine piano is no longer appropriate for the musical experiences of women in late-Victorian society. Fabi observes that James's "negative evaluation" of

the “phenomenon” of woman’s changing role in society is accurate (14), and the piano as a signifier of this phenomenon is no exception.

Rosier was right on some level: Pansy’s nationality does complicate the question of her ideal *jeune fille* status, but it does not redeem the *jeune fille* within either European or American society. The juxtaposition of cultural expectations and performance intent serves to illuminate the inherent problems within the unremitting role of the piano girl in the nineteenth century, and questions how she can possibly maintain her value and cultural purpose under the changing conditions and expectations of society on both sides of the Atlantic.





## Chapter 5

### Chopin's *Preludes*: Repertoire and Audience in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*

The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column. It was not the first time she had heard an artist at the piano. Perhaps it was the first time she was ready, perhaps the first time her being tempered to take an impress of the abiding truth.

Kate Chopin  
*The Awakening* (209)

I must signalise the preludes as most remarkable (Opus 28). I will confess that I expected something quite different, carried out in the grand style, like his *études*. It is almost the contrary here; these are sketches, the beginnings of studies, or, if you will, ruins, eagles' feathers, all wildly, variegatedly intermingled.

Robert Schumann  
*Music and Musicians* (209)<sup>1</sup>

Of all the nineteenth-century texts that might have confirmed to good mamas and papas that Romantic music would persuade their daughters into moral disorder and "wild confusion," Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is a good candidate. Music, specifically a prelude by Frédéric Chopin (1810-1849), awakens, for perhaps the first time, Edna Pontellier's readiness "to take an impress of the abiding truth" (209), that truth being tied up in her dissatisfaction with her role as wife and mother, and a longing to live like an artist, seemingly free from societal constraints and expectations. For Chopin's contemporary audience, Melanie Dawson writes, "Romantic music, Edna's overwhelming emotional response, and metaphorical drowning would have suggested that music was a culprit to blame for Edna's unusual behavior and her eventual and immoral death [...]" (91). That the enigmatic pianist Mademoiselle Reisz is the catalyst for Edna's awakening is without question, as from

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<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from Robert Schumann's review following the publication of Chopin's set of twenty-four preludes (*Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, 19 November 1839, 163). The translation provided here is from the 1877 translation by the American musician Fanny Raymond Ritter. This was the standard translation of Schumann's musical essays at the end of the nineteenth century and throughout most of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, I first became aware of the extract through Jeffrey Kallberg's *Chopin at the Boundaries* (Harvard, 1996). It was a line in Kallberg's translation—"ruins, individual eagle pinions, all disorder and wild confusion" (146)—that made me consider the complexities between Kate Chopin's repertoire choice and Edna's narrative.

the first chords of Reisz's performance, Edna's previous fondness and visual response to music is overwhelmed by a visceral outpouring of uncertain emotion.<sup>2</sup>

Reminiscent of Isabel Archer encountering Madame Merle at the piano at Gardencourt, Edna does not have the language to interpret her response to Reisz's performance. Instead, it evokes Haweis's analysis of Romantic instrumental music—"It reveals us to ourselves—it represents those modulations and temperamental changes which escape all verbal analysis [...]"—and music seems to feed a "deep, ineradicable instinct" within Edna that resists the role given to her by society (Haweis 286). Furthermore, Reisz is seemingly guilty as Merle of deliberate phonological seduction. Indeed, Reisz plays for Edna because she believes her to be the "only one worth playing for" (210). Such was the contemporary critical response to Reisz's influence on Edna and her rejection of the social role of wife and devoted mother, that even a favourable review in the *St. Louis Post-Despatch* from May 1899 labelled the pianist "a witch" (Deyo 55). Recent scholarship has been more enthusiastic in its response to Reisz: Joyce Dyer, for example, describes her as the centre of both "beauty" and "wisdom" in the novel (95); and Wendy Martin alludes to her as a "woman warrior" in comparison to the "mother-woman" embodied in Adèle Ratignole, the other significant female influence on Edna (25). Nevertheless, in the scholarly debate about Reisz, her artistry and her influence, the subject of repertoire goes largely unnoticed.

Kate Chopin knew her music, and as Doris Davis reminds us, Reisz's "talent in music is not happenstance" (89). Not only was Chopin an accomplished pianist, her first publication was a piece of piano music, the "Lilia Polka" (Toth 181).<sup>3</sup> More significantly for the narrative of *The Awakening*, Chopin's first published story, "Wiser than a God," was the tale of Paula Von Stolz who rejects marriage in favour of a career as a concert pianist, the "purpose" of her life ("Wiser than a God" 668).

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<sup>2</sup> Edna is not the only character in Chopin's stories to be awakened emotionally by music, but she is the only female character. See Nancy S. Ellis's chapter "Insistent Refrains and Self Discovery: Accompanied Awakenings in Three Stories by Kate Chopin" from *Kate Chopin Reconsidered* (Baton Rouge, 1992) for a critique of the musical episodes in "With the Violin," "After the Winter" and "At Cheniere."

<sup>3</sup> The "Lilia Polka" was published in 1888 by H. Rollman & Sons of St. Louis, and was named in honour of Chopin's daughter Lélia. (Toth 181; Davis 89). Continuing the allusions to Frédéric Chopin, it should also be noted that Lélia is the title of one of George Sand's novels (Toth 144).

For Davis, Chopin's musical credentials are important in understanding the characterisation of Reisz, as she discusses:

However believable her fictitious character may be, though, Chopin knew well that her heroine, Paula, was an anomaly in real life. There were, in fact, few successful nineteenth-century women concert pianists. Those that did exist were typically perceived by society as suspiciously "masculine" or in some other way peculiar. (90)

Davis's article develops from the observation that Chopin's descriptions of Reisz, both physically and musically, "seem informed [...] by the nineteenth-century conception of women concert pianists as somehow unnatural" (97), and aims to provide a socio-historic "background against which Chopin created her musical virtuoso [...]" (96).

If, as Dawson suggests, "[t]he metaphors, which pervade the narrative voice, portray Edna's thinking in terms of music, suggesting a stability and a reliability in conjunction with music" (94), and if Reisz's musicianship is not "happenstance," then neither should it be happenstance that Edna is "awakened" during a prelude, and later listens to Reisz extemporise on an impromptu, by Frédéric Chopin. Repertoire, such as Schubert in *The Portrait of a Lady*, contains a discursive meaning often overlooked in literary scholarship. More than simply a convenient allusion to the author's name—though this should never be fully discounted—Chopin inspires in his mythology and his music many things significant in the text—cultural difference, artistic sensibilities, gender and sexuality.

In *The Awakening's* narrative conflict between conventional gender roles and individualistic artistry, I will argue that it is not only appropriate, but deliberate that Edna should respond as she does to a composer who was "culturally, historically, and musically" aligned with the feminine (Kallberg 32), but all the while maintained his canonical "masculine" status. Davis argues that "If we examine the music Reisz plays, much of it defies the nineteenth-century view of how and what women *should* play" (96). This is true to a point, but if we take a more detailed look at genre, repertoire, and contemporary reception, it only serves to show that there are no easy equations to be made between feminine and masculine, domestic and independent. The abiding truth remains complex and inconsistent.

It is important to first establish the significance of repertoire in *The Awakening*, as Kate Chopin has chosen her musical allusions carefully and

appropriately. Musical metaphors “pervade the narrative voice” (Dawson 94), and even the memory of Adèle Ratignolle’s domestic music foreshadows the conclusion of the novel. Edna’s visceral response to Reisz’s performance is in part significant because it differs from her previous encounters with music, such as the piece she likes to hear Adèle play and mentally entitles “Solitude.”

When she heard it there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him. (209)

The concert on Grand Isle (discussed in more detail below) includes music from the operas of Louis Hérold and Franz von Suppé. Although performed in the context of derivative piano-girl music, they are still important within the thematic imagery of the narrative. The opera *Zampa*, which Hérold wrote in 1831, ends with its wicked protagonist, the pirate Zampa, drowned by the marble statue of a woman he once betrayed. Dawson argues that Suppé’s *The Poet and the Peasant*, “highlights thematic contrasts between the artistic elite and those unfamiliar with traditions of artistry in its title” (87).

Later in the novel, Reisz plays for Edna—once more at Robert Lebrun’s request—an unspecified Chopin impromptu, intertwined with Isolde’s *liebestod* aria from Wagner’s opera *Tristan and Isolde*.

Mademoiselle played a soft interlude. It was an improvisation. [...] Gradually and imperceptibly the interlude melted into the soft opening minor chords of the Chopin Impromptu.

Edna did not know when the Impromptu began or ended. She sat on the sofa corner reading Robert’s letter by the fading light. Mademoiselle had glided from the Chopin into the quivering love-notes of Isolde’s song, and back again to the Impromptu with its soulful and poignant longing. (270)

As Dawson quite rightly observes, the music of Wagner is “another foreshadowing of death associated with music and love” (87). As Reisz’s music “grew strange and fantastic—turbulent, insistent, plaintive and soft with entreaty” (270), the symbolic



associations between music, water and solitude are reinforced. Edna is literally aligned with the opera's (and legend's) theme of love, death and the sea.<sup>4</sup>

When Reisz performs at the Grand Isle party, the Chopin prelude crashes against Edna like waves and evokes the voice of the sea throughout the novel: "seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in the maze of inward contemplation" (190).<sup>5</sup> Shortly after the concert her response to the music is translated into courage to swim for the first time (212). Chopin's music is also distinctly linked with Robert Lebrun on both occasions it appears in the novel. He encourages Reisz to play at Grand Isle and it is at his written request that Reisz plays the impromptu for Edna. Chopin is not only a catalyst for self-realisation, but suggests a trope for Edna's unfulfilled romantic attachment to Robert.

But all music in this text does not have such romantic power, and significantly, the music Edna hears when she is with Alcée Arobin, who will later become her lover, but who "was absolutely nothing to her" (292), certainly does not inspire any depth of feeling. At a dinner party they attend after the races, Miss Highcamp plays "some selections from Grieg upon the piano," and she "apprehended all of the composer's coldness and none of his poetry" (287). These are not the turbulent waters of Wagner or Chopin played by Mademoiselle Reisz, but the deep, still fjords of Norway misrepresented by a proficient, but unpoetic piano girl, who prefers to attend a "Dante reading" than gamble at the races: "While Edna listened she could not help wondering if she had lost her taste for music" (287). Clearly her tastes lie with the excesses of Chopin's Romanticism than Edvard Grieg's musical style characterised by the Norwegian folk idiom and the movement known as musical nationalism—a musical style that although Romantic in scope developed into the more functional and linear harmony of early-twentieth-century neo-Classicism.

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<sup>4</sup> Huneker describes *Tristan and Isolde* thus: "the bliss-stricken pair, Tristan and Isolde, dive down to death, groping as they sink, for the problems of life, love, and mortality. Death and Love is the eternal dualism chanted by Wagner in this drama" (*Overtures* 328).

<sup>5</sup> As mentioned in Chapter 3, Chopin's use of the sea metaphor is significantly different from Cassandra Morgeson's interaction with the sea in Elizabeth Stoddard's *The Morgesons*. Both women are attracted to the fluctuation and power of the water, but unlike Cassandra, Edna abandons herself to this power rather than embracing the fluctuation.

Although Kate Chopin only mentions Grieg once in the text, she has certainly chosen the composer as the antithesis to the music of Chopin and Wagner. Edna's response is reminiscent of James Huneker's (and, we can therefore deduce, a dominant attitude in American musical letters) dismissal of Grieg's importance to post-Wagnerian music: "Grieg built his nest overlooking Norwegian fjords, and built it of bright colored bits of Schumann and Chopin. He is a bird with the one sweet, albeit monotonous note. He does not count seriously" (*Overtones* 315). Chopin does not however deny the poetry in Grieg's music, but in the hands of the Highcamps, described each as "indifferent" (285), "knowing but noncommittal," and "unresponsive" (287), it represents controlled feeling and frozen sexuality.

This repeated musical imagery of water, death and sexuality is reminiscent of Richard Leppert's description of a French piano from 1902 with case art painted by Albert Besnard and contemporary readers' belief in Romantic music's inherent sexual degeneracy:

The instrument's lid is like a Victorian photographic album of erotica, properly kept closed when not in use. To open it is to engage in a sexual-musical, implicitly forbidden, pleasure. The woman's body is swept over by a golden-edge water-music, which at once engages her sexually – erotically washing between her legs, drawing attention to the swelling form of her pelvic area – but also threatening her with drowning. ("Sexual Identity" 122)

Many nineteenth-century philosophers believed that music "heightened a listener's awareness of sensuality, sexual desire, and seduced a listener into abandoning decorum and propriety" (Dawson 87), and Wagner and Chopin were considered amongst the worst culprits.

According to Huneker, who wrote the definitive late-nineteenth-century biography of Chopin, the composer was "the unconscious centre of all the hazy, purple dreams, drifting ideals, and perfumed sprays of thought that to-day we call romanticism" (*Overtones* 322), and that his music "has the hypnotic quality more than any composer of the century, Richard Wagner excepted" (*Chopin* 115). Of course, Huneker was being complimentary, and when it came to Wagner, not everyone was so positive. For instance, the philosopher Max Nordau, whose *Degeneration* forms the theoretical basis for Dawson's article, directly charges Richard Wagner with "a greater abundance of degeneration than all the degenerates

put together [...]” (171). His music, his “erotic madness” (182) of seemingly endless phrases and cadences is the zenith of Romantic degeneracy because it “must continually promise, but never perform; must seem about to tell some great secret, and grow dumb or break away ere to throbbing hearts it tells the word they wait for” (13). In current musicological theory, *Tristan and Isolde* in particular is the established point of reference for the late-Romantic link “between the flow of desire and the prolongation of tonal uncertainties [...]” (Kramer, *Music and Poetry* 166).

Critics have long acknowledged the homoeroticism between performer and auditor in *The Awakening*. There is no question at this time that the female performer was a worryingly androgynous, bordering on homosexual figure, quite in contrast to the sexual, yet safely maternal character of Adèle Ratignolle. Kathryn Lee Seidel addresses this in “Art as an Unnatural Act: Mademoiselle Reisz in *The Awakening*,” and through the nineteenth-century understanding of the female artist as lesbian argues that Reisz is not just “an American madwoman in the attic,” but suggests to Edna “another way of being female” (206).<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, regarding heterosexual desire, that Robert encourages Reisz to play for Edna reinforces this association between sexuality and music. However, it would not be in keeping with Chopin’s narrative, which does not cast judgement or offer apologies for Edna’s actions, to make such easy associations between musical reception and dangerous sexuality. Dawson establishes in her argument that “*The Awakening* does not fully voice a suspicious attitude toward Romantic music” (87), and while my immediate response is, well neither did of plenty of people in the late nineteenth century, a more scholarly suggestion is that similarly, we should not essentialise Edna’s response to that music.

In such philosophies that saw music as a “destructive force in society” (Dawson 88), great artistry was equated with bewitchment and malevolent intent, and as Seidel confirms, this is present in the characterisation of Reisz.

The metaphors which Chopin uses regarding Mademoiselle’s relation to Edna are those of magic, witchcraft, and enchantment. She is “grotesque,” plays music that is “strange and fantastic,” and even

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<sup>6</sup> In this article Seidel discusses how “the novel reveals the sea of ideas regarding such areas as male-female friendship, male-female love, male-female sexual behavior, as well as female-female friendship, love, and sexual behavior” (201).

owns a small cauldron. (206)

Frédéric Chopin may not have inspired demonic fear amongst his listeners, but his music certainly invoked a public reception dripping with metaphors to “otherworldly beings, in particular fairies, elves, sylphs, and angels” (Kallberg 63). George Sand famously gave Chopin, her lover from 1838 to 1847, the sobriquet “*un ange*,” while a reviewer nicknamed him the “Ariel of the piano” (Kallberg 70, 65). Furthermore, an obituary to the composer in the *Journal de Débats* (22 October 1849), claimed that, “Of all the artists of our day, it is Chopin who took most possession of the soul and spirit of women” (Kallberg 66).

This is the image of Chopin’s music that Dawson relies on in her article (even though she largely avoids specific discussion of contemporary responses to Chopin’s music), and from this position, she is right to argue that Kate Chopin does not create in Edna the “typical young female listener” who is “[p]assive and impressionable” (92), but she does rely on a readership who expect this to be the case. As Dawson continues, Edna’s reception of “Mlle Reisz as a musician does not completely conform to expectations set up by the narration any more than Edna does as a listener” (96). Nevertheless, she is too quick to take only one nineteenth-century response to Romantic music and a fairly extreme at one, conveniently avoiding the equally “typical” opinion that “[t]o girls of eighteen or thereabouts Chopin is a religion—a sentimental one” and that his music “is in the emotional curriculum of every woman who plays the piano” (Huneker, *Overtones* 277, 278).

Taking Dawson’s line of enquiry, based on the observation that while *The Awakening* does not fulfil “stereotypes and clichés associated with Romantic music” it does suggest and “undercut these representations” (94), I wish to develop the complex signs within the musical representations of this novel, and show that accepting the convention in Chopin does not undermine the power of his music or indeed, Edna’s response. It does potentially make her stance of independence from her social role as wife and mother more challenging to achieve if the surrounding community thinks her response a bit silly and temporary, but this text does not offer easy alternatives to the accepted patterns of middle-class life. Furthermore, it is essential to reiterate Lawrence Kramer’s warning that “[m]eaning is an irrepressibly volatile thing; you really can’t have just some of it” (*Cultural Practice* 2). That it

was possibly considered clichéd or immature to be “awakened” by Chopin only serves to show the intricacies of the society Kate Chopin depicts, and the difficulties Edna faces in demanding subjective autonomy.

My argument is critical to understanding the deeper significance of Chopin’s music within this narrative. Mary M. Bendel-Simso sees Edna’s inability to “create a stable subject position” as the “key quandary of the novel” (39), and one which Edna fully recognises when she tells Arobin, “I’m going to pull myself together for a while and think—try to determine what character of woman I am, for candidly, I don’t know” (299). The codes of nineteenth-century society suggest that Edna is “a devilishly wicked specimen of the sex” (299), but Edna can’t convince herself of this fact. Like the cadences of Wagner that refuse to reveal their final meaning, and the imperceptible boundaries of improvisation and set score in Reisz’s latter performance, Edna does not know where her identity begins and other people’s perception of her ends.

Those critics that do acknowledge the significance of the composer Chopin in *The Awakening* seem only to do so within general discussions of nineteenth-century receptions of Romantic music. Lynda S. Boren sees Chopin’s portrait of Edna as the “inevitable extension” of Henry James’s “troublesome ambivalence” to Emerson’s syllogism that language is the symbol of spirit, and more specifically, the Emersonian heroine embodied in Isabel Archer. Chopin’s music, Emerson’s texts, and “the seductive ‘voice of the seas’” all serve in *The Awakening* to illuminate this tradition of “American Protestant mysticism” (*Eurydice* 45).<sup>7</sup>

Elaine Showalter approaches the specific reference to Chopin in the text from two levels: firstly, as “allusions to an intimate, romantic, and poignant musical *oeuvre* that reinforces the novel’s sensual atmosphere,” and secondly, as functionaries of “what Nancy K. Miller has called the ‘internal female signature’ in women’s writing, here a literary pun signature that alludes to Kate Chopin’s ambitions as an artist and to the emotions she wished her book to arouse in its readers” (47). This claim is confirmed in the fact that *The Awakening* is not the only Kate Chopin story that uses Chopin the composer. In “Wiser than a God,” the first

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<sup>7</sup> In “Taming the Sirens: Self-Possession and the Strategies of Art in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*,” Boren discusses the biographical evidence for Chopin’s scientific and psychological interest in music, particularly in the records of her intellectual circle in St. Louis (188-89).



piece of music Paula plays—indeed the first musical performance in Chopin’s fiction—is Frédéric Chopin’s “Berceuse” (661). Showalter also briefly outlines the similarities between the composer’s musical style and the novelist’s written style and form.

The composer’s techniques of unifying his work through the repetition of musical phrases, his experiments with harmony and dissonance, his use of folk motifs, his effects of frustration and delayed resolution can also be compared to Kate Chopin’s repetition of sentences, her juxtaposition of realism and impressionism, her incorporation of local color elements, and her rejection of conventional closure. Like that of the composer’s impromptu, Chopin’s style seems spontaneous and improvised, but it is in fact carefully designed and executed. (47)

Most surprisingly, Dawson’s article, which looks at *The Awakening* in the context of some nineteenth-century philosophical fears about the degeneracy of Romantic music, barely mentions Chopin except in general terms. She avoids any detailed analysis of the composers mentioned in the text, in favour of contextualising the novel with works by other writers of the period, such as Leo Tolstoy, Henry James, and George du Maurier (88)—indeed, the critiques of these other texts illuminate more about the use of music in text than Dawson’s own analysis of *The Awakening*.

Conversely, Davis goes as far in her analysis to suggest the “Fantaisie-Impromptu” (Op. 66) for Reisz’s later private performance, because its form “mirrors the restless energy we see in her own manner” (96). Her discussion of repertoire focuses on the technical prowess required to play Chopin’s works, and the contemporary masculine association with many concert pieces. Of the Grand Isle performance, Davis writes, “Here is no performer of a ‘dainty’ or ‘graceful’ style. We are told she ended the performance with a Chopin prelude, a kind of piece which is short but technically brilliant, like ‘small shooting stars’” (96). This is certainly true of the *Preludes*, but when one assesses the musicological discussions of the impromptus, the gendered significance of the works rather undermines Davis’s position. Davis does concede, however, that some of Chopin’s works were considered appropriate for women pianists, but the very intangibility of Chopin’s musical structures and gendered significance has gone largely unnoticed by critics of

this text that so famously challenges the gendered expectations of women and artistry in the final years of the nineteenth century.

The importance of an impromptu and, more specifically, an improvisation is fairly straightforward—it suggests a creative freedom from set form and structural expectation. “It was an improvisation,” the text proclaims when Reisz plays for Edna in her garret apartment (270). She is not just playing the music of Wagner and Chopin, she is playing her own music. It shows defiance on behalf of Kate Chopin towards “the typical view that women lacked creative power” (Davis 95). Davis is of course considering Reisz’s own improvisation at the piano, but its juxtaposition with a Chopin impromptu is potentially problematic. They were written with a definite “avoidance of virtuosic and affective extremes” (Samson 221), and Jim Samson argues that the structural consistency of Chopin’s four impromptus, a genre that “lacked any conventional generic definition in the early nineteenth century [...] spell[s] out his rejection, or rather transcendence, of the obvious associations with improvisation” (Samson 223). Even Huneker, whose study of Chopin was dismissed in recent times as “a welter of woolly romanticizing” (Rawsthorne 43), writes that “With all the freedom of an improvisation the Chopin Impromptu has a well-defined form” (133).

Generally speaking, however, the four impromptus by Chopin have not received the same analytical attention as his other works. It is not that they are underrated by music scholarship or performers, but they are largely considered to be incidental pieces in the tradition of “feminine” salon music and not “masculine” concert pieces. The “Fantaisie-Impromptu”<sup>8</sup> suffers most from this reputation:

The Fantaisie-Impromptu is the earliest of the series and the least interesting, in spite of the elegance and charm of the semiquaver figuration; the middle section in D flat is rather too much in the sentimental salon style that is regarded as typical Chopin. (Collet 143)

If we consider Showalter’s claim that the signature pun alludes to “the emotions she wished her book to arouse in its readers” (47), then those emotions must be established, and it must be considered what Kate Chopin’s audience might have regarded as “typical” Chopin.

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<sup>8</sup> Op. 66 was published posthumously in 1855 and did not receive its popular title “Fantaisie-Impromptu” until sometime later, for reasons unknown today.

“All artists are androgynous,” wrote Huneker, “in Chopin the feminine often prevails [...]” (71), and this sentiment informs the response from critics and performers that the composer’s music and life is distinctly feminine. George Sand famously embodied Chopin in her characterisation of Prince Karol in *Lucretia Floriani* (1847), who she describes as “an angel with the beautiful face of a sad woman, tall, perfect and slim of figure like a young Olympian god [...]” (5), and consequently set in place the mythical image of the man and his music:

Gentle, sensitive, exquisite in all things, at the age of fifteen he had all the graces of adolescent combined with the gravity of maturity. He remained physically delicate, as he was spiritually. But this very absence of muscular development had the advantage of preserving in him a charming beauty, an exceptional physiognomy, which, so to speak, was without age or sex. (4)

Sand’s image of Chopin persisted throughout the century and even to this day, and as a consequence of persistent critical attempts to relate the composer’s life with the art, his music never sits comfortably in conventional classifications of form, genre, gender, or performance practice. With works too short for large-scale grandeur and too complex to be written off as light, domestic music, Chopin was a canonical composer of the “masculine” concert-stage, but nineteenth-century performance practice and pedagogy deemed much of his music more suited to female pianists than serious male performers.

James Parakilas explains that Chopin’s music was often subject to “artificial gender distinctions” established by male performers and teachers (he specifically cites Carl Czerny, the Austrian pianist and composer of *études*) “to maintain the power of men in a field that otherwise would soon have been dominated by women” (121). As a performer, Chopin notoriously “shunned the limelight” and “refrained from public propaganda about his music,” and this inspired an almost fanatical need amongst his contemporaries to interpret how the “composer’s life related to his music.” His “complicated and often tendentious” life dominated by ill-health only served to invite further critical investigation (Ballstaedt 18), and the lack of tangible autobiographical material meant that the myth of Chopin and his music was soon sentimentalised (Marek 247). This assessment from Huneker is representative of such criticism: “Chopin’s violence was psychic, a travailing and groaning of the

spirit; the bright roughness of adventure was missing from his quotidian existence. The tragedy was within" (*Chopin* 3).

By the mid-twentieth century, an anti-Romantic movement sought to "[sweep] away false sentiment, wilful distortion and impudent tampering of nineteenth-century music" and reclaim Chopin's works from late-Victorian excess. In the process of attempting to "faithfully" interpret the composer's style, the anti-Romantics' criticisms of late-nineteenth-century performance practice give us a good indication of how Kate Chopin's contemporaries would have played and listened to Chopin's music.

As time passed the shadowy tradition of Chopin's playing vanished into thin air. In all aspects his art as a pianist and composer was overmagnified and coarsened. His warm but restrained poetic sentiment was degraded into luscious sentimentality; his dramatic episodes became sensational melodrama; his moments of exhilarating virtuosity degenerated into vulgar displays of crazy speed and showmanship; and passages to which Chopin had given an added charm by his fanciful but discreet rubato now staggered along under a weight of distorted rhythm and cheap "effect." (Hedley 17)

Nevertheless, that "shadowy tradition of Chopin's playing" was just as difficult for his contemporaries to assess and interpret. Andreas Ballstaedt, in his critique of the German critical reception to Chopin, argues that the inherent binary opposition within contemporary Chopin reviews is best illuminated in the "two recurrent topoi" of "specific political messages (amongst others the Polish struggle for freedom)," and the apparently contradictory "emotional and sentimental descriptions of the music" that aesthetically align Chopin with the composers of salon music (18). The term "salon" was employed by German reviewers, often pejoratively, "to impose a value judgement" (Ballstaedt 19), yet like other nineteenth-century appraisals of Chopin and his music, this value judgement was notoriously uncertain and ill-defined. Like Mademoiselle Reisz does for Edna, Kallberg declares that "Chopin unsettles us" (ix), and the following extract from the Introduction to his 1996 work, *Chopin at the Boundaries: Sex, History, and Musical Genre*, is one of the most succinct descriptions of this problematic figure:

At once exalted and shadowy, he cuts a curious figure in contemporary culture. Ethereal composer and enervated *enfant male* (or so the popular biographical image of him would have us believe), he parries attempts to reconcile the music and the man. A Pole who

wrote most of his works among Frenchmen, his music exudes exoticism at the same time as it partakes of the European common-practice tradition. Champion of the miniature at a time when many around him gravitated toward ever grander musical colossi, he confounds our abilities to hear his contemporaries and him on equal footing. A male composer who wrote in “feminine” genres like the nocturne for domestic settings like the salon, he confuses our sense of the boundaries of gender. Central to our repertory, Chopin nevertheless remains a marginalized figure. (Kallberg ix)

If Kate Chopin has chosen the other music within the text with such symbolic care, then one can presume the same of the prelude. Unlike the other pieces mentioned in the text, it does not have the same narrative intent, which is especially significant to Edna’s visceral awakening, as opposed to her visual, descriptive response to Adèle’s music. The *Liebestod* from *Tristan and Isolde* has unavoidable poetic and narrative intent. Similarly, the operatic music of Hérold and Suppé played by the Farival twins at the Grand Isle concert, are very much narrative pieces, as is the Grieg played by Miss Highcamp. The most immediate work that comes to mind with Grieg is the incidental music to Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* (1875), but many of his piano pieces were marked by the nationalist movement ideal of folk music-inspired compositions and lyrical, programmatic intent.

The prelude then is worthy of specific attention, because of what Kramer says about music being discursive. What Chopin’s prelude is saying to Edna cannot be defined by the programmatic intent or the text embedded in the music, but it perhaps has more to say that all the other works together. In this novel filled with musical reference, it is emblematic of the fault lines between female representation, domesticity, and art that run through the entire narrative. Most significantly, the music chosen by Kate Chopin for Edna’s awakening and the eventual realisation of her uncertain role within this society was marked from its premiere by audience and critical confusion. Chopin’s *Preludes*, Op. 28—the source of Reisz’s Grand Isle repertoire—are almost always associated with ambiguity of form and structure. In the words of musicologist Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, words which easily compare with Edna’s own struggle with selfhood, “[t]his volume gazes at us like a sphinx proposing a riddle, and one that has remained more or less unsolved” (167).

Preludes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were generally accepted to be short pieces, often of an improvisatory nature, that acted as introductions to



larger, sometimes unrelated works, or functioned as an educational piece. Bach's *Das Wohltemperierten Klavier* (1722) quickly became synonymous with the prelude (and fugue) form, and lent a distinct pedagogical signification to the genre.

But it chiefly lead to a wide proliferation of preludes and studies in the twenty-four keys from the first years of the nineteenth century. These were closely linked with the rise in the piano's popularity and acquired a status of their own in the post-Classical, Romantic era. (Eigeldinger 171)

Chopin's *Preludes* follow this tradition in essence, being twenty-four short pieces for piano "grouped according to the normal order of their scales, each major key being followed by its relative minor" (Cellier i), most around one to two minutes long, with only No. 15 exceeding four minutes, but Nos. 1 and 7 only thirty seconds long. Yet, despite the conventional presentation of the prelude form, the standard response to Op. 28 has been that it "cannot for one moment be considered from the didactic point of view [...]" (Cellier i).<sup>9</sup>

Critics and audiences did not hear what they expected and immediately responded to these short musical sketches as being somehow an integral, organic musical cycle, or a "collection of isolated miniatures," rather than functionary preludes (Eigeldinger 178). In a review of Chopin's 1841 Parisian recital, Franz Liszt declared the *Preludes* "of an order entirely apart."

They are not only, as the title might make one think, pieces destined to be played in the guise of introductions to other pieces; they are poetic preludes, analogous to those of a great contemporary poet, who cradles the soul in golden dreams, and elevates it to the region of the ideal. (qtd. in Kallberg 146)

Robert Schumann's review of the entire work best highlights this contemporary anxiety of what the *Preludes* meant: "these are sketches, the beginnings of studies, or, if you will, ruins, eagles' feathers, all wildly, variegatedly intermingled" (Schumann 209). Even as late as 1948, the literary and music critic André Gide

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<sup>9</sup> I chose to take this quote from a standard mid-twentieth-century edition of Chopin's Op. 28, edited by Alfred Cortot and published by Editions Salabert in Paris. The "Documentary Notice" by Laurent Cellier expresses a very conventional opinion about the *Preludes* as being an integral musical cycle unto themselves rather than a collection of musical introductions. Jeffrey Kallberg is particularly interested in dispelling this belief, stating that "to argue for the worth of op. 28 on the basis of its supposed function as a sublime 'large form' rather than on the basis of its individual small numbers would seem at once to perpetuate some of the gender-based aesthetic justifications of the nineteenth century and to accept the premises of the old canard that Chopin was not a master of large forms even as it attempts to refute them" (149-150).

expressed his concern over the nature of Op. 28: "I admit that I do not understand well the title that Chopin liked to give these short pieces: *Preludes*. Preludes to what?" (Kallberg 146).<sup>10</sup>

For Kallberg, this reluctance to accept functionary form "betrays a continuing distrust of the small, a refusal to accept Chopin's *Preludes* at face value" (150), but the musicological debate over performance practice does not remove the conventional nineteenth-century understanding of the *Preludes* as unstable in form, genre and poetic intent. Chopin's *Preludes* transcended the safe and domestic miniature form, and demanded a grand-scale poetic response based on ambiguity.

The association with Chopin and the feminine is, from the outset at least, fairly elementary, because if we accept that genre is in part a "communicative concept shared by composers and listeners alike" (Kallberg 32), then one must ask who made up this community of intention and response for Chopin's music? Chopin's association with the female-dominated Parisian salons of the 1830s and 40s, and his tendency to compose in miniature forms means that for Kallberg the answer is, "women, mainly" (32). Of course, the answer is never that simple, for Chopin or *The Awakening*. If Chopin is the salon composer, whose music ought to fill the programmes of Madame Ratignolle's *soirees musicales*, then the radical portrayal of Reisz is undermined by a poor repertoire choice on behalf of the author. She becomes nothing more than a spinster pianist playing feminine music in a largely domestic setting. However, as Kallberg rightly reminds us, "[w]hile women and the piano were clearly paired in the general consciousness of many nineteenth-century observers, the feminine topos did not extend to all genres of piano music" (38).

In fact, it was Chopin's nocturnes that were especially associated with the feminine, domestic piano, and more specifically with feminine emotion.<sup>11</sup> Huneker is apologetic about the "feminine" characteristics of the nocturne, dismissing the genre

<sup>10</sup> Here I quote Kallberg's own translation of Gide's original: "J'avoue que je ne comprends pas bien le titre qu'il a plu à Chopin de donner à ces courts morceaux: *Préludes*. *Préludes* à quoi? (*Notes sur Chopin* 28).

<sup>11</sup> Haweis specifically refers to "a weird *nocturno* of Chopin" in his romantic depiction of how music can satisfy and console the "restless, unsatisfied longing" of a piano girl (112) (see Chapter 1). In his critique of contemporary reviews of Chopin's nocturnes, Kallberg argues that "[...] nineteenth-century listeners to the genre of the piano nocturne often couched their reactions in feminine imagery" (32), and "direct references to the perceived feminine quality in the nocturne were accompanied by other figural language. "Feeling," "dream," longing," "sentiment," "tender"—all of these affective terms were linked to, and surely in different degrees meant to complement, the primary image of the feminine" (34).

as incompatible with the musical sensibilities of turn-of-the-century performers and audiences, and explaining them as a product of an overly poetic genius: “The poetic side of men of genius is feminine, and in Chopin the feminine note was over emphasized—at times it was almost hysterical—particularly in these nocturnes” (*Chopin* 142). Reisz does not play any nocturnes; she plays a prelude and an impromptu. Nevertheless, the piano’s association with the feminine is crucial in understanding Chopin’s ambiguously gendered reputation and Reisz’s characterisation, because while preludes especially might not inspire the same feminine response as nocturnes, they still maintain some of the gendered associations. Even as late as 1994, the concert pianist, Hélène Grimaud expressed in an interview her frustration with having been typecast since her teens to play Chopin and Debussy. “She described her resistance to Chopin as part of a rebellion against performing in ways that might be ‘expected’ of a female pianist” (Kallberg xi).<sup>12</sup>

Despite Reisz’s unsettling performance of the prelude, Kate Chopin has created in the concert on Grand Isle a very believable showcase of nineteenth-century feminine musicianship. These fictional female performers run the gamut of “piano-girl” possibility—Reisz included, because we must presume that even if she became a consummate artist, she would have learnt the instrument initially out of convention. The American piano industry was reliant on the domestic market, a market which exploited the feminine and domestic ideal “that the piano ‘is in some sort taking the place in our homes of the family hearth’ and it is regarded ‘almost a requisite of housekeeping’” (Loesser 521). The sheer number of pianos in the market, and the girls and women who played them well, meant that merely owning a piano and being a fine musician did not automatically demand social distinction and respect. Loesser argues that the history of the piano in the late nineteenth century is “largely a record of its purchase by great numbers of not so ‘nice’ people” (521).

*The Awakening* is very much a novel about “nice” people, who are certainly wealthy enough to own quality instruments and provide a high standard of musical education for their daughters. Nevertheless, there is no consistency in what that high standard meant: some girls would hammer away at “The Battle of Prague” and some

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<sup>12</sup> The *New York Times* interviewer, John Rockwell, had commented to Grimaud that her repertoire choices of Rachmaninoff and Brahms were “odd not only for a French Pianist but also for a female one.” [*New York Times* 29 May 1994] (qtd. in Kallberg x-xi).

might eventually be able to play as well as Reisz. As I mentioned in the Introduction, there is a critical tendency to compare all piano-playing characters with either Austen's novels or Clara Schumann. For instance, Davis's comparison of the piano girl of nineteenth-century literature with the so-called "real world of female pianists" is, as I discussed, rather unrealistic (91). Clearly indebted to Judith Tick's "Passed Away is the Piano Girl," Davis discusses the few American women who did become professional pianists during this period, on the assumption that although Reisz "does not support herself through concertizing, her evening performances at Grand Isle leave little doubt that she has artistry essential for such a career" (90).

Without wishing to undermine Davis's excellent article about how the "nineteenth-century conceptualization of the female concert pianist as "unnatural" may offer insight into the complexity of Chopin's character Mlle. Reisz" (90), and while completely acknowledging of her position that Chopin's first heroine, the concert pianist, Paula "was an anomaly in real life" (90), I wish to take semantic issue with the phrase "real-world of female pianists." Such a statement denies the very tangibility of the musical world Chopin depicts, potentially weakening Davis's analysis of how a character like Reisz might respond to the conditions of her society and late-nineteenth-century musical opportunities for women.

While Austen's world was nearly a century past at the publication of *The Awakening*, it is still closer to the musical world of Chopin's text than the professional career of Clara Schumann and her handful of professional female peers. Despite Chopin's jaded audience and their obvious acceptance of Reisz's talent, if not Reisz herself, the piano girl was as little passed away in Chopin's New Orleans, as it was when Huneker coined the term in 1904 (Tick 325). *The Awakening* quite literally does show the real world of the nineteenth-century female pianist: a world of mothers playing parlour music, schoolgirls playing operatic arrangements, and a spinster piano teacher who is possibly a better player than most professional performers.

At the concert on Grand Isle there is no set programme, but the evening's entertainment follows a well-worn pattern of the parlour tradition: "Music, dancing, and a recitation or two were the entertainments furnished, or rather, offered" (205). Of course, the implication is that no one in particular is being entertained, especially

considering the children have been rehearsing all summer; only the parrot can mimic the exasperated silence of the audience with its constant cry of “*Allez vous-en! Sapristi!*”<sup>13</sup>

He was the only being present who possessed sufficient candor to admit that he was not listening to these gracious performances for the first time that summer (206).

The Farival twins dutifully fulfil their “piano-girl” roles, while the young dancer makes everyone slightly uncomfortable by drawing to attention the inherent sexuality of these domestic performances. Dressed in virginal blue and white and watched over by an anxious grandfather, the fourteen-year-old twins, who were “dedicated to the Blessed Virgin at their baptism” (205), are in danger of remaining in perpetual childhood. There is no animosity from the Grand Isle circle towards their performance—a conventional piano duet transcription of music from Hérold’s opera *Zampa*, followed by the overture to Suppé’s *The Poet and the Peasant*—just indifference. The performance is “accomplished” and represents the social preparation of girls for the marriage market, but like Pansy Osmond before them, they are so desexualised that their virginity renders them sterile. This absence of sexuality is repeated with Miss Highcamp’s frozen and unpoetic performance of Grieg (287). Worse still for the twins, the text implies that they will never even attract husbands since they refuse to dance because they cannot be induced to separate.

Unlike the “faultless Madonna” Adèle Ratignole, who has arguably benefited from the culture of the piano-girl, the future is less certain for this younger generation. There is an obvious parallel between Adèle and the twins, because with her *soirées musicales* and later appeals to Edna to “think of the children” (343), she is the ideal of maternal and domestic musicianship. Although not noticeably pregnant, she is eager to announce her “condition” by playing the piano instead of dancing. Like a character in an 1860s *Godey’s Lady’s Book* story, “She was keeping up her music on account of her children, she said, because she and her husband both considered it a means of brightening the home and making it attractive” (207).

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<sup>13</sup> *Allez vous-en* translates as “go away.” *Sapristi* is a mild expletive, along the lines of “good heavens.” More famously, Tintin uses the expression, and this is replaced in the English versions of the comics, as “great snakes.”



In a concert full of child performers and domestic expectations, it is little wonder the Grand Isle circle are thrilled to hear some music of a professional standard. Chopin has written in the imperious Mademoiselle Reisz, a self-confessed artist who sees her place in society as one of defiance. Like Frédéric Chopin himself, she “shuns the limelight” and “refrains from propaganda” (Ballstaedt 18), performing as she wishes and ignoring the attentions she claims not to seek. As she declares to Edna later in the novel, “the artist must possess the courageous soul. [...] The soul that dares and defies” (269). She is the embodiment of the socially marginalised artist, living in her “pigeon house,” surrounded by her signifiers of musicality—with the dominating piano and the bust of Beethoven, she is the stereotypical Romantic artist in the garret—and deciding the terms of engagement with any potential audience and society in general. Reisz’s life and musicianship, as Davis discusses, “attests to the likely socially-imposed isolation of any nineteenth-century woman who dared challenge the acceptable pattern for female achievement” (89).

Chopin’s physical description of Reisz, as she enters the Grand Isle hall in preparation for her performance, paints an awkward picture of contemporary expectations of the performer and artist.

She was a homely woman, with a small weazened face and body and eyes that glowed. She had absolutely no taste in dress, and wore a batch of rusty lace with a bunch of artificial violets pinned to the side of her hair. (208)

Here one could argue that the artificial violets represent either a parody of feminine charm, or a sense of faded glory, however, Davis takes particular historical care when analysing Reisz’s physical appearance. With reference to her performance of the Chopin impromptu, Davis compares Chopin’s description that “her body settled into ungraceful curves and angles that gave it an appearance of deformity” (270) with contemporary reviews of women pianists.

One thinks of [Rosalyn] Turek, who disguised her sexuality (even in the twentieth century!), of Fannie Bloomfield-Zeisler with her “full, hunched shoulders” and “sinewy body,” of her “vehemence of attack” (97).

The end of the nineteenth century was a turning point in the great years of the piano and the gendered associations of music, as Tick explains:

Whereas in 1870 women played the piano, harp, or guitar for the most part, by 1900 there were professional violinists and professional all-

women orchestras. In 1870 women composers wrote parlor songs; even fewer wrote parlor piano music. By 1900 there had been premieres of concertos and a symphony by American women. (326)

Nevertheless, the acceptance of women's professionalism was met with an elaborate institutional and economic segregation and discrimination. Female soloists and stringently female-only orchestras were a social novelty, and although successful, were of little threat to "legitimate" male orchestras. Tick goes on to note that, "[u]ntil 1904 the Musicians' Union legally excluded women from playing in union controlled public orchestras," and that although social stereotyping claimed that "feminine frailty" meant women were physically ill-equipped for the rigours of a professional orchestra, "[p]rejudices against women players were rationalizations designed to protect the limited job market against competition" (332-33).

It would have been a difficult time for a pianist like Reisz to define her status in society. Yet on the face of it, Reisz does not contradict any social code of feminine professionalism; she is first and foremost a music teacher. In the contradictory market of music, "women poured into a profession whose supply and demand they controlled" (Parakilas 143), and women like Reisz taught a generation of girls less likely to respond to the light and winsome parlour music played by their mothers and grandmothers, preferring the "unladylike vigors" of serious composers such as Robert Schumann, Mendelssohn and Beethoven (Loesser 543). Tick's research provides extremely important statistics into the sheer number of women who were music teachers in the latter part of the century. Although census statistics did not distinguish between musicians and music teachers after 1870, the census of that year showed that "women constituted only 2 percent of the professional musicians but 60 percent of the teachers" (326).

The social marginality of Reisz's role as the disagreeable spinster pianist is still within the limits of respectability for late-nineteenth-century New Orleans. She is *their* spinster pianist. The community might not necessarily wish to socialise with her, but they are quite happy to hear her play. Dawson also dismantles a conventional reading of Reisz as the quintessential Romantic artist, shunning the outside world and living solely for her art: "Mlle Reisz's appearances in the social realm of Edna's life counteract some of the foreboding, romantic aspects of her personality, for she is not particularly aloof, unsympathetic, or obsessed by her art" (92). Although Reisz's

acquaintances consider her disagreeable, she does not live beyond the pale of New Orleans society. The “witch” herself has a sanctioned role to play.

Reisz’s reluctant appearance in the Grand Isle concert line-up, at the behest of Robert Lebrun, is a welcome relief, and by no means a shock to upper-middle-class New Orleans sensibilities. “A general air of surprise and genuine satisfaction fell upon every one as they saw the pianist enter” (208-9). Reisz believes Edna’s reception of her performance to be more valid than the rest of the audience, mainly because she is captivated by Edna (270). Chopin is however quick to dismiss any exclusivity in musical and emotional understanding, because Reisz is “mistaken about ‘those others.’”

Her playing had aroused a fever of enthusiasm. “What passion!”  
“What an artist!” “I have always said no one could play Chopin like  
Mademoiselle Reisz!” “That last prelude! Bon Dieu! It shakes a  
man!” (210)

Davis writes that we can almost hear the men in the audience saying, “She plays like a man” (96), and while I appreciate the contemporary association of professional musicianship with masculinity, here, I read Chopin’s text as a genuine response to a fevered performance. Or indeed confirmation that Edna’s lack of essentialism is extended to everyone in the novel.<sup>14</sup>

There are no easy conclusions to make about anyone. This is, after all, socially and economically an audience that would have had the musical knowledge to respond appropriately and genuinely to a Chopin prelude, no matter what Reisz may have to say about the standard of musicianship at the New Orleans symphony orchestra (308). Despite the philosophical fears about the influence of the music on the weak-minded, European Romantic music was revered throughout the United

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<sup>14</sup> Huneker offers an interesting point about the gendered reception of Chopin that has resonances with *The Awakening*. In a facetious episode of *Overtures*, quoted briefly in the Introduction to this thesis, he makes fun of the contradictory principles of women’s response to music in late-Victorian thought. Beginning with the assumption that “in Chopin emotional sensibility predominates, and as women are supposed to be more emotional than their mates, *ergo* they should play Chopin better,” he then draws on popular scientific thought by asking the question “If women are deficient in brain weight, in nervous and spiritual powers, how is it that they attempt Chopin at all?” (279). Of course, this entire premise is scurrilous and he eventually turns the entire debate from a faux-serious discussion about women’s incapacity to “really” play Romantic music to a rather pointed attack on the propensity to make morals and social dictates out of music: “Because there is no sex in music, and because you may not be very moral or very intellectual, and yet play Chopin like “a little god”—as Pachmann would say. And now for my most triumphant contention: if the majority of women play Chopin abominably—so do the majority of men!” (285).

States. Lawrence W. Levine writes in *Highbrow Lowbrow* (1988) that the sacralisation of high art, in particular, Italian opera and Shakespeare, lifted appreciation of Romantic music to a level of divine adoration.

When Hegel wrote in the early nineteenth century, “We are beyond the stage of reverence for works of art as divine and objects deserving our worship,” he was being a touch optimistic. In late nineteenth-century America the momentum was in the other direction. (Levine 168)

Romantic music was the elite popular music of the day. From Wagner’s operas to the lionisation of virtuosic pianists like Rubenstein, the concert-going public was generally quite knowledgeable about this music.

Mr. Pontellier might avoid the “bourgeois” *soirées musicales* of Madame Ratignolle (277) in favour of the club, and the Pontelliers’ regular attendance of the French Opera is part of the confines of Edna’s domesticity (248), but Chopin’s text only hints at the concert life available to the New Orleans public at this time. Furthermore, the musical life of New Orleans clearly allowed Edna to have “heard an artist at the piano” before (209), thereby preparing her for her musical reception and awakening. We do not know what concerts Chopin herself attended during her time in New Orleans, but we do know she held the sort of *musicales* and *veillées* that Mr. Pontellier so despised (Toth 126).<sup>15</sup>

The city was in cultural terms, as John Joyce writes in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the “Paris of America” (809). Accordingly, it followed Parisian fashion and was the first city in the United States to have a permanent opera company, established in the 1790s. Its later French Opera House, built in 1859, was “one of the biggest and most expensive opera houses in the Americas.” Whereas the rest of America championed the German high-art tradition, the French city of New Orleans unsurprisingly showed a “marked preference for French and Italian works” (Joyce 809)—of which *Zampa* was a popular favourite throughout the century (Belsom par. 10). It was also musically adventurous within its cultural tastes. During the 1840s the city hosted the United States premieres of “no fewer than twelve” of Donizetti’s operas, including *Lucia di Lammermoor* in 1841

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<sup>15</sup> Toth writes that “[m]ost of Kate Chopin’s life during the New Orleans years (1870-79) is mysterious, unknown” (125), however, she does briefly mention the Chopins’ *veillées* (informal, spontaneous parties) and music evenings during their time in Cloutierville (153), and the more formal *musicales* Kate Chopin would later organise in St. Louis (255).

(Belsom par. 13), and in the latter third of the century, when the rest of the country was in the grip of Wagner-fever, the French Opera House was responsible for the premiere stagings of numerous French works, such as Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Dalila* in 1893 and Gounod's *La Reine de Saba* in 1899 (Joyce 809, Belsom par. 22).

Orchestral concerts were generally more conservative in their repertoire, but Joyce goes on to say that critical reactions to New Orleans concerts suggest a consistently high standard of musicianship (810). Significantly, two very important nineteenth-century pianists hailed from New Orleans: Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829-1869), virtuoso and composer, and one of the undisputed stars of the Romantic piano; and Ernest Guiraud (1837-92), a professor of music at the Paris Conservatoire and the teacher of Debussy and Dukas.

In 1899, Frédéric Chopin had been dead fifty years, and was a canonical figure in western art music. Late-nineteenth-century histories of the composer may have been coloured by a romanticised legend and a performance practice steeped in sentimentality, but for the people of New Orleans, with its civic focus on French music and its reputation for producing pianists of high calibre, it is conceivable that the majority of Reisz's audience, and Kate Chopin's readership, were not only familiar with Chopin's *Preludes*, but knew them well enough to make a considered and informed critique of Reisz's performance.

Chopin also posits another cultural significance: when he became the toast of Paris in 1831, his exoticism was central to his appeal. Not only was he a great virtuoso, but his compositions were infused with the folk music of Poland. Haweis wrote in the late nineteenth century that "Chopin was essentially a national musician. Although he lived much in France, his music is never French. 'He sings in one clear harp in divers tones,' the swan-song of his people's nationality." (304). But this is Chopin and nothing is so straightforward. The cultural association and similarity of Chopin the composer with Chopin the author goes far deeper than surname alone.

Although raised in Warsaw, Frédéric Chopin's father was French. His music was the product of his mother's culture and its music, transformed by western European cosmopolitan expectation and education. Like Edna Pontellier, and to a lesser extent Kate Chopin herself, Frédéric Chopin always remained an ethnic outsider in his adopted French society. Kate Chopin was born Catherine O'Flaherty,



the daughter of Thomas, a successful Irish immigrant and Eliza Faris, of old French American stock. Kate's upbringing amongst the French populace of St. Louis meant that the move from Missouri to Louisiana on her marriage to Oscar Chopin (also the son of a French immigrant) was not the culture shock experienced by Edna in *The Awakening*. According to her biographer, Emily Toth, Chopin garnered some disapproval from her relatives and neighbours in New Orleans and the plantation parish of Natchitoches, mainly on account of her penchant "to take long, solitary walks around New Orleans, smoking her Cuban cigarettes whenever she could" (Toth 125), but the young Mrs. Chopin was as Acadian Creole as she was Irish American. Edna however "was an American woman, with a small infusion of French which seemed to have been lost in dilution" (176). Raised a Presbyterian in Kentucky, Edna is culturally different from her French-speaking Roman Catholic neighbours. There is never any question of Edna's acceptance into her new community, in fact she is greatly admired as a fashionable and engaging woman, but her growing intimacy and acceptance within this society only strengthens her sense of otherness.

The most apparent feature of Edna's otherness is her lack of engagement in the role of motherhood. In comparison with Adèle Ratignolle, the "faultless Madonna" who is the ideal of Creole femininity and maternity, Edna feels she is inadequate (185). She is not a "mother-woman" who "seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle":

[...] women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels. (181)

Léonce Pontellier is unable to define why Edna does not fully satisfy his ideals of a wife: "It was something which he felt rather than perceived, and he never voiced the feeling without subsequent regret and ample atonement" (181). Nevertheless, Léonce's social situation and aspirations are as responsible for the couple's cultural difference to the rest of the *quartier français* as is Edna's Kentucky childhood. Léonce is forging a new American life, with business interests in New York and his use of the English language "with no accent whatsoever" (257). He denies his cultural heritage as much as Edna believes herself to be outwith Creole custom and expectation. The economic success and progressiveness of Léonce only serves to

exacerbate Edna's position as an object of his possession, and fear of possession is her defining motive throughout *The Awakening*. Edna is trapped within this world because she does not wish to be possessed, by the community, her husband, or even her children.

The Pontelliers' marriage is in direct contrast to Monsieur and Madame Ratignolle, who are a definitive Creole couple. Their language, style and the nature of their marriage remains steadfastly in the old French Louisiana tradition. They are strictly known by the French, Monsieur and Madame, unlike the English titles of Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier, and "there was something which Edna thought very French, very foreign about their whole manner of living" (255). Unlike the Pontelliers, Adèle and her husband have a marriage of mutual interests and equal partnership, and Edna is deeply conscious of this comparison: "The Ratignolles understood each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished on this sphere it was surely in their union" (257). Yet, Toth is quick to point out that "the Ratignolles fill Edna with depression and boredom and pity, for the 'blind contentment' that strikes her as unthinking, even bovine" (131), because "[i]t was not a condition of life which fitted her, and she could see in it but an appalling and hopeless ennui" (258).

In this regard, the Pontelliers are surprisingly in agreement, though with quite different outcomes. If we look only at domestic music, this is apparent: Leonce finds Adèle's *soirées* bourgeois, and Edna finds the Ratignolles depressing in their "domestic harmony" (258). The piano is of course representative of this feminine world of *soirées*, motherhood and domesticity, and Edna is immediately aware that music and art do not inherently transcend domestic drudgery. Within the Pontelliers' mutual rejection of bourgeois niceties lies a gendered double standard: Leonce may reject domestic music, but his wife may not. He cannot comprehend why Edna need leave his home to do some painting. In his mind, Adèle keeps up her music without letting "everything else go to chaos" (259). This is of course a matter of artistry and Edna's answer to her husband is swift and realistic: "She's not a musician, and I'm not a painter" (259). More importantly, Edna is aware that art is not the reason for her desire for independence. "It isn't on account of the painting that I let things go,"

she informs her husband (259), recognising that it is something within her that has been awakened by artistic expressions.

It is worth noting, therefore, that Edna's independent identity does not truly present itself in her painting or musical reception. Indeed, it is at the races that her Kentucky bluegrass self comes to the forefront like the native swansong of a Chopin polonaise. And she positively sparkles.

There were possibly a few track men out there who knew the race horse as well as Edna, but there was certainly none who knew it better. She sat between her two companions as one having authority to speak. She laughed at Arobin's pretensions, and deplored Mrs. Highcamp's ignorance. The race horse was a friend and intimate associate of her childhood. The atmosphere of the stables and the breath of the blue grass paddock revived in her memory and lingered in her nostrils. (286).

Like Chopin or Gottschalk, who became famous for his Creole inspired piano music, she shows her true mettle in the things she knows. Her bluegrass blood comes through and "fortune favour[s]" her, like the Polish idiom that permeated the music of Chopin. Doctor Mandelet, really the only character in the book who Edna thinks could have understood her (351), recognises this need for her native sense of self when he tells Mr. Pontellier, "Let her stay among her own people for a while; it will do her good" (273). And the narrative suggests that he is correct: Edna may return in the end to the sea—the site of her "awakening" (J. Gray 54)—but as she swims further and further from the shore, her final thoughts are of another life in Kentucky.

Edna heard her father's voice and her sister Margaret's. She heard the barking of an old dog that was chained to the sycamore tree. The spurs of the cavalry officer clanged as he walked across the porch. There was the hum of bees, and the musky odor of pinks filled the air. (351).

Art is the easy signifier of independence, but it is not always the natural indicator of one's free spirit. For Edna the realisation comes that she does not wish to be an artist, so much as she wishes to acquire the freedom representative in art. She is able to secure some independent income from her drawings, but Edna knows she lacks the artistry to truly succeed. Without repeating the well-established link between the mother-woman and the artist-woman embodied in Edna, this idea is important in Edna's musical reception of the Chopin prelude, and the role of feminine artistry in the novel.

She is not a “mother-woman,” nor is she a woman warrior. Instead, as her name suggests, she is “one who bridges” – Pontellier – the traditional affiliative, instrumental, feminine mode and the aggressive, autonomous ideals of the new woman. (Martin 25)

In this world of mother-women and artist-women it would seem that the two must be mutually exclusive. The artist has an equally fixed role to play as Adèle at her domestic piano.

Would the late-nineteenth-century public have accepted so readily a sexual, maternal character as Madame Ratignole playing Chopin with the same influence as Mademoiselle Reisz? It seems impossible. Citing Charlotte Gilman’s argument in *Women and Economics* (1898) that “each woman has had the same single avenue of expression and attainment” (79), and Peggy Skaggs’s description of Reisz as the “artist-woman” (348), Jennifer B. Gray proposes an alternative and far more controversial way between these two types of womanhood: “Edna further experiments with a highly oppositional role, the ‘free-woman,’ a role of individuality and sexual freedom” (56). The great tragedy for Edna is that she is unable to pursue this avenue in the context of her society. She is a *fin-de-siecle* figure caught on the margins of gender and social expectations. As Andrew Hook writes, “[w]hat Kate Chopin does is to face squarely the tragic implications of conflict with society for the individual for whom there is nowhere to escape to; [...] Edna is at last free to choose – but only as long as she chooses to die” (175).

I have almost entirely neglected Robert Lebrun from this analysis. Martin views Robert as a figure who undermines Edna’s quest for independence because, although “[she] has freed herself from the domestic imperatives of her husband’s house, she becomes ensnared by romantic love, which, masquerading as freedom, actually undercuts her possibility of autonomy” (23). This is Adèle’s fear when she tells Robert to “[l]et Mrs. Pontellier alone. [...] She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking you seriously” (200). Chopin’s music does appear in the novel at the request or suggestion of Robert, and these three figures, Reisz, Robert and Chopin, all awaken something powerful in Edna.

But, it is important to realise that they are not the cause. Art is just a catalyst, as Seidel makes clear: “Edna, like Mademoiselle, defies the Victorian imperative to tend house, husband, and children, but she also defies the conventional explanation

that artistic ability is the cause of the aberration” (208). Well before Edna is awakened by Reisz’s performance, or is even conscious of anything more than harmless attraction to Robert, she is reminded of walking through a Kentucky meadow on a hot day as a girl, and her connection with that “little unthinking child [...] just following a misleading impulse without question” (195). Edna is conscious of something in herself that is being rekindled: “sometimes I feel this summer as if I were walking through the green meadow again; idly, aimlessly, unthinking and unguided” (195). If Reisz’s performance is the “awakening” of Edna, then it is the period before the concert that is the real prelude to her new self-identification. Chopin’s text is explicit on this point: “In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and around her” (189-90).

In the context of the contemporary reception of *The Awakening*, Edna awakens herself to disorder and wild confusion, and Reisz’s performance is quite literally a prelude to ruin. Of course, the text is free from such didacticism, but Dawson’s conclusion that, “Mlle Reisz as a musician does not completely conform to expectations set up by the narration any more than Edna does as a listener” (Dawson 96), raises questions about what Edna and the rest of the audience on Grand Isle are “meant” to be hearing, rather than a philosophical fear of Romantic music. In a private, domestic performance, a Chopin prelude at once reinforces the cultural and social stereotypes at play, all the while creating a sense of otherness in Edna, that—reinterpreting Seidel’s analysis of Reisz’s music influence—causes in her “feelings so powerful that they undermine the calm, domestic underpinnings of society” (201).

Chopin’s frank treatment of sex and suicide might have been met with public and critical outrage, but although Edna’s death may be “unthinking” even within the context of the narrative, she still swims “far out, where no woman had ever swum before” (212). Despite his warnings of confusion and ruin, in his review of Op. 28 Schumann provides an answer for the receptive uncertainty: “let every one look in it for something that will enchant him. Philistines, however, must keep away” (210), and this is as applicable to *The Awakening* as it is to the music that awakens Edna. This understanding of musical reception was utterly consistent with even the more conservative musical theory of the day, as Haweis confirms: “Six different people,



hearing the same piece of music, will give you six different accounts of it," because each person is different and responds to music differently:

The question for the listener then is, What are his planes of thought and feeling—in other words what is the character of his musical mediumship? Music will give him what ever he is capable of receiving" (95).

Just as Adèle warns Robert to let Edna be, therefore appreciating the problems Edna is experiencing, the Grand Isle circle understands and appreciates Reisz's music, yet like Schumann's initial response to Chopin's *Preludes* predicated on the traditional indication of the title, they view Edna's situation according to their own terms and belief in an inherent structure. They see it as a foolish fancy that is quite literally a prelude to ruin and wild confusion.

Edna, however, is not seduced by the power of Reisz's performance, and neither does she respond to it like a sentimental girl; she takes from it that which is in her already, according to her character—might we posit, her characterless character. She is ready "to take an impress of the abiding truth" (209), to hear Reisz play and to respond to the music. Yet it is equally according to *her* own terms and *her* abiding truth. Reworking Haweis's words for Edna and the characterless piano girl—Music will give *her* whatever *she* is capable of receiving.

## Conclusion

“[I]f we see Edna’s decision to swim into the sea’s ‘abysses of solitude’ as simply a ‘realistic’ action,” writes Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, “we are likely to disapprove of it, to consider it, as a number of critics have, ‘a defeat’ [...]” (*No Man’s Land* 2:109). So it might also seem a defeat abandoning the piano girl somewhere in the Gulf of Mexico never to see the twentieth century. Yet, by reading Edna’s “supposed suicide” as a “subversive questioning of the limitations of both reality and ‘realism,’” as Gilbert and Gubar suggest (109), we come close to the reason why James Huneker claimed in 1904 that the piano girl was passing away from his society.

The limitations of nineteenth-century domestic ideals embodied in the piano girl were incompatible with what he saw as the new “age of specialization” (*Overtones* 293). “Here is a pretty paradox,” he wrote, “the piano is passing and with it the piano girl,—there really was a piano girl,—and more music was never made before in the land!” (286). Huneker enthusiastically celebrated a new age in which a girl “freely admits that tennis is greater than Thalberg,” if that’s what she thought (291). This was an age he hoped, “when woman is coming into her own, be it nursing, electoral suffrage, or the writing of plays” (293).

In a word, I wish to point out that piano-playing as an accomplishment is passing. Girls play the piano as a matter of course when they have nimble fingers and care for it. Life has become too crowded, too variously beautiful, for a woman without marked musical gifts to waste it at the piano. (292)

For those women who did have musical gifts, the age of specialisation began to allow them to demand not only the right to personal expression, but the opportunity to support themselves financially through their talents. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story of 1911, “Making a Change,” provides a radical, yet practical solution to the discontent of many middle-class women, brought on by marriage and old age. She argues that the accomplishment of music has a function within modern society that does not stop at the marriage ceremony, nor is incompatible with the financial support of the family.

The practice of giving up music on marriage has almost tragic consequences for Julia Gordins, a young woman who is not coping with marriage and motherhood, or the presence of her interfering mother-in-law.

Here was a noble devotion on the part of the young wife, who so worshipped her husband that she used to wish she had been the greatest musician on earth—that she might give it up for him! She had given up her music, perforce, for many months, and missed it more than she knew. (183-4)

After Julia's attempted suicide, her mother-in-law suddenly realises what is going on and the two women work together to satisfy their needs and reinterpret their roles within this particular family unit. The young Mrs. Gordins starts teaching music again, and the older Mrs. Gordins opens a daytime nursery in the flat upstairs, allowing her to profit from the task she enjoys most. The women are happy, the baby is happy, and Mr. Gordins eventually learns to cope with this domestic arrangement. "Mother has shown me the way out, Frank," Julia tells her husband, "The way to have my mind again—and not lose you!" (189).

However, we must be careful not to ascribe society's growing acceptance of professionalism amongst female musicians to Kate Chopin's uncertain conclusion in *The Awakening*. "The 'ideal' woman never emerges in Chopin's novel," Lynda S. Boren writes in "Taming the Sirens," and the solution to Edna's difficulties cannot be found in any one "consuming, exclusionary, self-defining role [...]," be it "[w]ork, art" or "motherhood" (182). Gilman's story certainly provides an ideal alternative to the wider conditions Edna represents, but it seems as yet impossible in turn-of-the-century New Orleans.

In terms of the signifying piano girl, this provides a useful example of why it is important to understand the conditions and demands of domestic music pertaining to each specific narrative. Relying on a conventional understanding of the piano girl stumbles at the first hurdle of which convention to choose. As I have shown in this thesis, the nineteenth-century piano girl refuses to conform to one stereotype or classification alone, be it Jane Austen's early-nineteenth-century depiction of feminine music in the English gentry, Sarah Hale's domestic rhetoric or even Romantic fetishism for the concert performer. Furthermore, the piano girl was so ubiquitous in American society that she is as multifaceted as the novels that represent her, and bound by the various conditions of American music-making. To utilise

Caroline Foley's theory of fashion once more, no one piano girl admits of performing in "one *mode* only" (462), and recognising domestic music as a vital signifier within American literature allows us to reconsider the domestic paradigms of individual texts.

From James Fenimore Cooper's echoes of Walter Scott's mad songs to Edna Pontellier's musical awakening, the texts I analyse demand that their characters and their readers attempt to recognise those dark things lurking beneath the curtains of performance (*Portrait of a Lady* 251). Furthermore, through my interdisciplinary analysis incorporating socio-musicology and the denotative meaning in musical works, they all confirm Lawrence Kramer's warning that musical meaning is volatile: whether it is the intention of repertoire, or the description of domestic performance practice, "you really can't have just some of it" (*Cultural Practice* 2).

In this thesis, I have uncovered a vigorous literary challenge to the application of a feminised, domestic musicianship in American society that was explicitly defined in Margaret Fuller's recognition that if music is a means of self-expression and individual growth, music for accomplishment's sake did not accomplish anything. While the other authors in this thesis do not wholeheartedly reiterate Fuller's position, they do resist blind adherence to conventional models. Music cannot be contained within the niceties of domestic or sentimental paradigms, but equally so, the quotidian must not only be acknowledged, it must be seen as important as music's "roar, its beauty" and "its madness" (Stoddard, *The Morgesons* 215).

This thesis charts the literary progression of the piano girl in nineteenth-century American life, and like Huneker, the texts question the validity of her role in the Modern world. It would be wrong however to suggest that the piano girl was gone entirely from American culture and literature by the early twentieth century, because women still played out of convention and sought the piano as a status symbol. As Judith Tick writes, "it is difficult to believe in the demise of the piano girl entirely. But that level of human truth need not obscure the real issue of social and economic change" (326). In literature also, the piano girl remains, but the clear cut division between artistry and consumerism was irreversibly challenged.

In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), one extract unites both Edna Pontellier's awakening and Cassandra Morgeson's engagement with consumer objects:

Now Carrie was affected by music. Her nervous composition responded to certain strains, much as certain strings of a harp vibrate when a corresponding key of a piano is struck. She was delicately moulded in sentiment, and answered with vague ruminations to certain wistful chords. They awoke longings for those things which she did not have. They caused her to cling closer to things she possessed. (*Sister Carrie* 96-97)

Like Kate Chopin and Elizabeth Stoddard, Dreiser refrains from casting judgement on supposed sexual impropriety, or indeed creating limits between Romanticism and convention, but at the turn-of-the-century, the piano is still a powerful symbol of social status that has very little to do with music.

Despite Carrie's eventual success as an actress and a financially independent woman, she maintains her attraction and dedication to the signs of societal acceptance. Early in the narrative, the playing of a piano is established as a social and fashionable necessity, equated with the playing of euchre, and the fact that Carrie does not know how to play either is largely irrelevant to their cultural value (91). Later, when Carrie has achieved fame as an actress, she gets a piano, just like the countless self-made Americans before her who saw the purchase of a piano as the symbolic fulfilment of their financial and social success. After all, Carrie had "[become] a girl of considerable taste" and the piano was "appropriate" furniture for the "so-called parlour" (277).

Nevertheless, pianos barely figure in the works of Edith Wharton, suggesting that the elite of New York society, like the European society Henry James depicted in *The Portrait of a Lady*, no longer felt the need to make special mention of music as an accomplishment. They might in *The Age of Innocence* have cause to shake their heads with disapproval at little Ellen Mingott's "expensive but incoherent education, which included [...] playing the piano in quintets with professional musicians" (1063), but ordinary piano girls hardly warranted a second glance. Woman was no longer "chained to keyboards" (Huneker 293) and in the early years of the twentieth century, interest slowly turned to those women who could be classed as professionals.



The piano girl who played to attract a husband and only continued her music for the private benefit of her family had lost her cultural worth and become symbolic of a reactionary attachment to past values and conventions. In her place the complex Romantic musician, like Willa Cather's Thea Kronberg in *The Song of the Lark* (1915), became a character worth celebrating in literature. The old-fashioned, unthinking piano girls who still fill her small prairie town of Moonstone, Colorado are auxiliary figures. "A good many people [...] making money lately" is still cause in this community for "ten new pianos" to be shipped in from Denver (127)—an economic development that will temporarily benefit Thea's prospects as a teacher—but it is utterly incompatible with Thea's musicianship and her place within that community. Thea is granted an escape, first to Chicago, and then to the concert halls of Germany, eventually becoming a celebrated opera singer, and this is the focus of the new literary musician. Not the restrained sentimentalism of the drawing room, but the values of a society in the throngs of Wagner mania, and the "feverish nerves" of a generation who demanded "metaphysical meaning" from music and their musicians (Huneker 333, 334).

The focus on musical professionalism and radical genius inevitably proved as much of an imposed social construct as the piano girl had in the nineteenth century. After all, conforming to character, in Elizabeth Oakes Smith's sense, is not made "characterless" by the role presented. Yet interestingly, it is not in an American text that we find some conclusion to the American piano girl, but rather in E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908). The Englishness of the narrative is underpinned by the transparent American Transcendentalism of Mr. Emerson, with his Thoreau quotes and disdain for the niceties of good society. Furthermore, like Henry James, Forster charts that social negotiation between convention, society, and the ideals of the individual. Art, possession, and a woman's right to decide for herself are at the forefront of the novel's narrative about a girl who plays the piano in a society that expects far more than mere talent.

Lucy Honeychurch is neither a "dazzling *exécutante*" nor a "passionate young lady," but she plays the piano wonderfully and is particularly known for her renditions of Beethoven (28).

Among the promised items was 'Miss Honeychurch. Piano. Beethoven', and Mr Beebe was wondering whether it would be *Adelaide* or the march of *The Ruins of Athens*, when his composure was disturbed by the opening bars of Opus 111. (29)

Playing Beethoven—and more importantly, playing Beethoven's *serious* repertoire—moves Lucy into indefinable passions and another world of worryingly egalitarian principles. "The kingdom of music," the narrative proclaims, "is not the kingdom of this world; it will accept those whom breeding and intellect and culture have alike rejected" (28). But music makes Lucy peevish, rather than sexually aware or passionately independent.

In this Edwardian English context, the passion of Beethoven, like the repressed feminism of Charlotte Bartlett, just makes Lucy more confused. She is not entirely sure how she is supposed to act, or what the code of practice is supposed to be, and is unconvinced by the repeated voices telling her that a woman's "mission was to inspire others to achievement rather than to achieve themselves" (38). Yet, in direct contrast to nineteenth-century narratives, the problem is also that everyone wants her to "succeed" at music and she is unconvinced by that too—"She liked music, but how much better tennis seemed" (153).

Unlike the community on Grand Isle who worry that Edna Pontellier might take Robert Le Brun and Mademoiselle Reisz's music "seriously," Forster's characters all seem fascinated with what would happen if Lucy was to live the passion they experience in her performances. Mr. Beebe's pet theory, "[i]f Miss Honeychurch ever takes to live as she plays, it will be very exciting— both for us and for her" (30), is the central theme of the novel. As it happens, Lucy is just a fine pianist, and as much as others may like to think, Cecil's art, the Italian countryside, or even the Emersons' American Romantic philosophy cannot change this.

Musical passion becomes just another convention imposed by society, and representative of Cecil Vyse's desire to wrap Lucy up in "art and music" (170). Her eventual awakening is not through music, but her association with other people: "I won't be stifled," Lucy declares when breaking off her engagement to Cecil, "not by the most glorious music, for people are more glorious, and you hide them from me" (170).

Marrying George Emerson is not in anyone's reckoning for Lucy, as every character has their own idea about what she ought to be, and as a consequence, the young couple are tacitly dismissed by the good county families. But it is Mr. Beebe who makes the most damning slur: he is no longer interested in them. The reality of a marriage based on mutual love and a woman who plays the piano with mere talent is not nearly as interesting as the potential of passion in a performance of Beethoven. The piano girl has passed away.



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